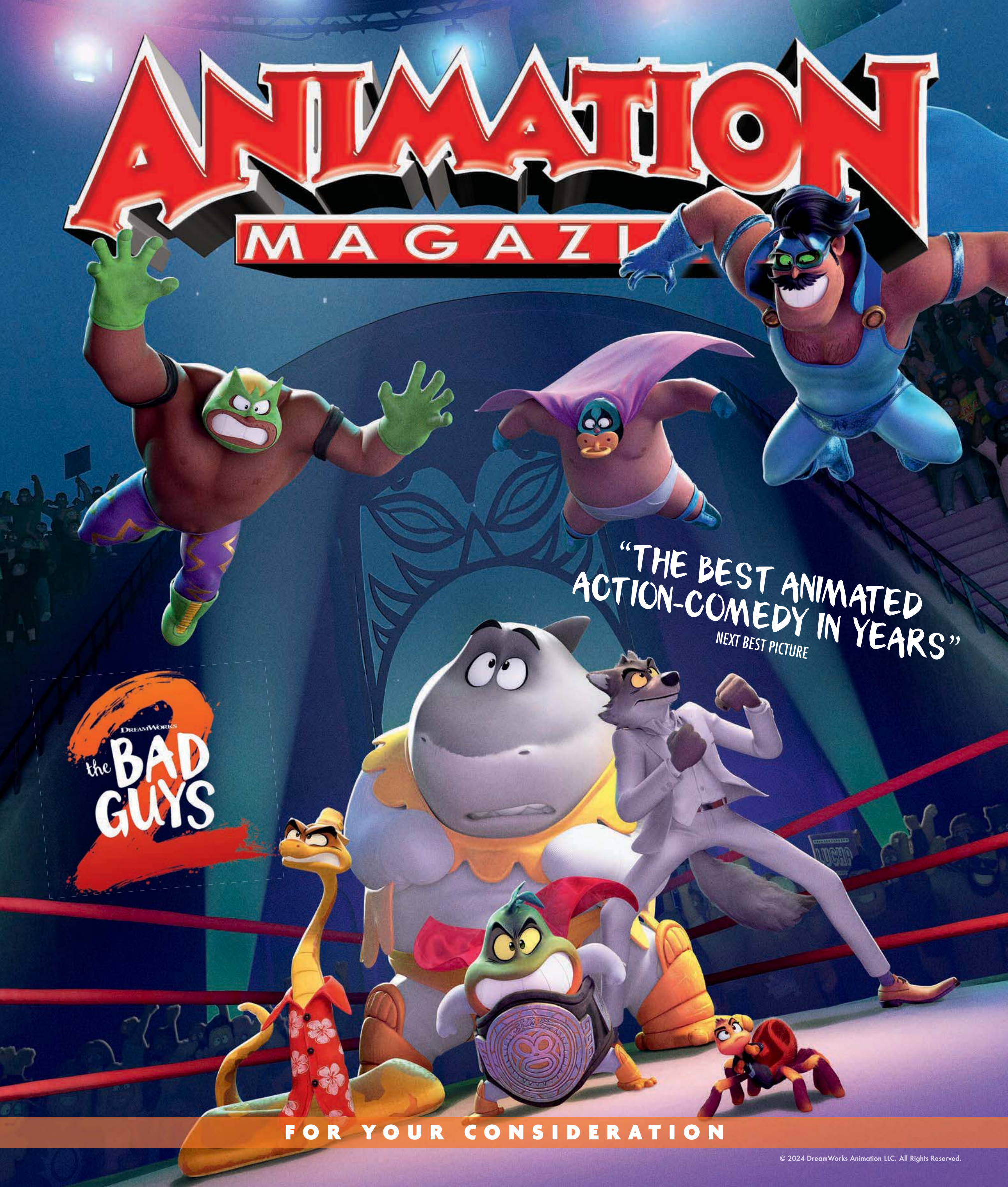
ANIMATION MAGAZINE



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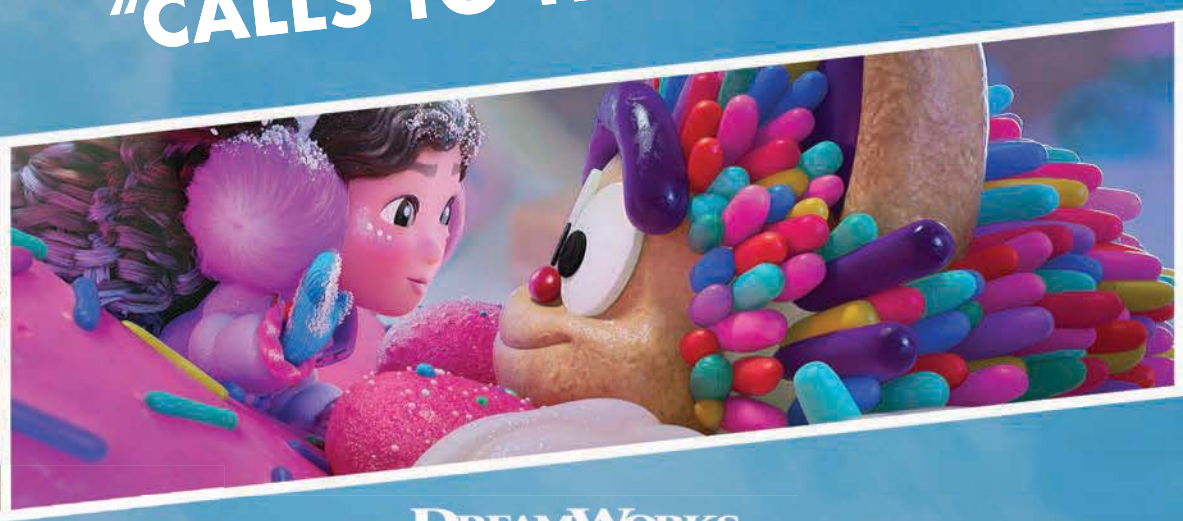
"PURE MAGIC.
A PURR-FECT LEAP TO THE BIG SCREEN."
NERDTROPOLIS

"CALLS TO THE MAGIC IN ALL OF US."
PARENTS



DREAMWORKS

GABBY'S DOLLHOUSE THE MOVIE

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

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DECEMBER 2025

ANIMATION MAGAZINE

ALEX WOO'S
IN YOUR DREAMS
AN ORIGINAL FANTASY SPARKLES ON NETFLIX

+

LITTLE AMELIE OR THE CHARACTER OF RAIN

ARCO

SCARLET

DECORADO

DISNEY'S ZOOTOPIA 2

STAR WARS: VISIONS S3

KPOP DEMON HUNTERS: EXCLUSIVE NEW ART

ANNUAL AWARD SEASON KICK-OFF ISSUE

$7.95 U.S.

09>

0 74470 82258 5

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

a Magnificent Life

A FILM BY
SYLVAIN CHOMET

SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE ANNECY 2025 COMPÉTITION

FESTIVAL DE CANNES
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2025
SÉANCE SPÉCIALE

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF "THE TRIPLETS OF BELLEVILLE"

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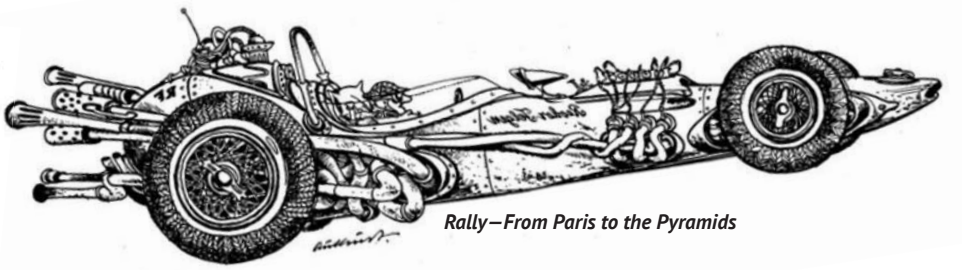
ANIMATION MAGAZINE™



Rally—From Paris to the Pyramids

DECEMBER 2025 • VOLUME 39 • ISSUE 9 • NUMBER 354 • ANIMATIONMAGAZINE.NET

Arco

In Your Dreams

Zootopia 2

FRAME-BY-FRAME

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Cover: Netflix's new animated feature *In Your Dreams* premieres on the streamer on Nov. 14.

AFM Cover: Rainbow's new animated series *Winx Club: The Magic* is back on Netflix.

Award Season Inside Cover: The Awards Section cover illustration was created by Jeaux Janovsky, a CalArts-trained animator and illustrator whose work mashes Saturday morning cartoons, pop art, and mischief. He's contributed to comics, animation, video games, toy and food design for clients like Mattel, Disney, Netflix, Food Network, Neon Films, Topps, and Frederator Studios, and has collaborated with legends Gene Deitch, Ralph Bakshi, and Fred Seibert. You can follow his latest work at @jeauxj

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Signs of Hope

We have been writing about the gradual decline of the old traditional outlets for animation for quite a while now, but I think this is the year that we saw tangible proof of this trend at content markets around the world. In October, many of the usual attendees of MIPCOM saw solid evidence for this trend with the absence of some of the tried and true animation powerhouses on the show floor. Instead, there was a positive wave of support for launching indie projects digitally and generating new ways of discovery for audiences to grow brands and involve fan interaction early on in the launch of new content.

We are very pleased to feature an exclusive interview with Claynosaurz co-founder and creative director Nicholas Cabana, one of the shining stars of this new era, in this issue of the magazine. I'm sure many of our readers will be inspired by the amazing story of how he launched his own transmedia brand of Jurassic stars, which became a hugely successful multi-million dollar brand in three short years. The story of his success is the perfect antidote to all the tales of doom and gloom we've heard about the demise of the old ways.

We're also fortunate to feature Nic and his super popular dinosaurs at our World Animation Summit (Nov. 17-19) at The Garland in N. Hollywood this month. Our event director Kim Derevlany has planned a jam-packed event filled with interesting keynotes, inspiring panels and memorable networking parties for the 13th edition of our annual event. We're also very excited about our Hall of Fame opening night gala, which is once again hosted by our friend, the very talented actor Eric Bauza (the voice of Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig, Woody Woodpecker and many of our other favorite toons). You can read all about this year's honorees and panels on page 12.

Of course, since this issue reaches your hands in November, we have included several feature stories about the many eclectic movies that are arriving in theaters to compete in the awards race. One of them, of course, is Karen Idelson's must-read cover story, which takes us behind the scenes of Netflix's charming new feature *In Your Dreams*. The film's director Alex Woo and his artistic team share some of the important lessons they learned on their big creative journey with us. I have a feeling the movie will follow in the footsteps of *KPop Demon Hunters* on the Netflix Top 10 chart when it premieres on the streamer on Nov. 14.

Last year, as you may recall, the awards race was a tight one between DreamWorks' *The Wild Robot* and Gints Zilbalodis' underdog indie *Flow* — which went on to collect the Oscar for Best Animated Feature in March. This year, the big money is on Sony and Netflix's chart-topping KPop songbirds, whose debut has already become Netflix's biggest movie of all-time and broken numerous Billboard chart records as well. But you can never underestimate the other contenders in the race, which are all included in our big Award Season dossier (meticulously compiled by Michael Mallory). You can read about several of the frontrunners, including Disney's *Zootopia 2*, Ugo Bienvenu's *Arco*, Mailys Vallade and Liane-Cho Han's *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain* and Mamoru Hosoda's *Scarlet* in this special issue.

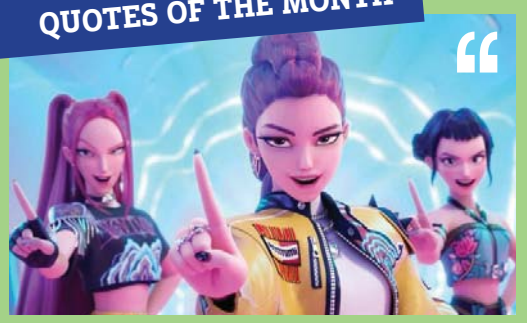
One final recommendation for this year: don't miss the opportunity to catch Roy and Arturo Ambriz's delightful stop-motion feature *I Am Frankelda* (*Yo Soy Frankelda*) on the big screen. We featured the movie in our previous issue (No. 353). Luckily, I was able to catch a packed preview of this labor of love at the Animation Is Film festival last month in L.A., and it was a true cinematic treat. Every frame just bursts with color, imagination, creativity and passion for the art form. We hope the movie will get official distribution in the U.S. and around the world, but it is truly one of those titles that is worth seeking out. It's a great reminder of why AI and big corporations will never replace the hand-crafted, artistic-driven works of art, which are made with heart and not by tech overlords bent on squeezing the most amount of money out of everyone!

Shirin Sohani (left) and Hossein Molayemi won the Oscar for Best Animated Short for In *The Shadow of the Cypress*.

***Flow* director Gintz Zilbalodis celebrated his Oscar win with a much-deserved dinner at In-N-Out Burger in March.**

Ramin Zahed
Editor in Chief
ramin@animationmagazine.net

QUOTES OF THE MONTH



"There's so many elements of the tone and the comedy that are so suited for animation. It's really hard to imagine these characters in a live-action world. It would feel too grounded, so it totally wouldn't work for me."
***KPOP DEMON HUNTERS* DIRECTOR MAGGIE KANG**

"One of the great things about animation is that you make these composites of impossibly great attributes. Rumi can be this goofy comedian and then singing and doing a spinning back-kick a second later and then free-falling through the sky … I remember they adapted a lot of different anime [into live action] and oftentimes, it just feels a little stilted."
***KPOP DEMON HUNTERS* DIRECTOR CHRIS APPELHANS**

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FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION IN ALL CATEGORIES INCLUDING

BEST PICTURE
BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

BEST DIRECTOR
Mamoru Hosoda

BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY
Mamoru Hosoda

BEST SOUND
Hiroaki Sato Kousuke Kobayashi
Hiroki Matsuura Remi Kurashima

FROM ACADEMY AWARD®-NOMINATED
MAMORU HOSODA

Scarlet

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Animation Planner/November 2025

By Mercedes Milligan

7

Two very different animated imports hit U.S. theaters today: The kid-friendly animal racing adventure ***Grand Prix of Europe*** (Viva) and the expanded release of artful Annecy prize winner ***Little Amélie or the Character of Rain*** (GKIDS).

11

Survey upcoming animate feature slates from around the world over six days at **American Film Market** in L.A. americanfilmmarket.com

13

Netflix families can enjoy some seasonal magic in the new special ***Unicorn Academy - Winter Solstice.***

Today is the deadline for Animated Fature submissions to the **98th Academy Awards**! oscars.org

14

Annecy Cristal-winning feature ***Arco*** arrives in U.S. theaters with a star-studded English cast, presented by Neon.

On streaming, Netflix subscribers can catch Alex Woo's family comedy-adventure ***In Your Dreams*** today.

15

Hayao Miyazaki's second Oscar-winning feature ***The Boy and the Heron*** makes its Studio Ghibli Fest debut with a five-day run of screenings from GKIDS and Fathom.

17

Gabby's Dollhouse welcomes kitty-loving kiddies back for Season 12 on Netflix.

Our can't-miss annual confab the **World Animation Summit** returns to North Hollywood with a packed three-day program of panels, keynotes and networking events. **animationmagazine.net/summit**

Grand Prix of Europe

Arco

In Your Dreams

The Boy and trhe Heron

The Mighty Nein

Angel's Egg

World Animation Summit

19

Critical Role fans get a new Exandrian saga in ***The Mighty Nein***, streaming on Prime Video.

Mamoru Oshii's rarely screened early career gem ***Angel's Egg*** hits cinemas in a new 4K restoration from GKIDS.

20

Jurassic World: Chaos Theory Season 4 roars onto Netflix today.

Burbank, CA, the World Capital of Animation, is taken over by **CTN eXpo** this weekend. ctn-events.com

26

Disney's big holiday release ***Zootopia 2*** brings Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde back to the big screen for a new critter crime caper today!

Festivals

Animex
Middlesbrough, U.K.
animex.tees.ac.uk

Cinanima
Espinho, Portugal
cinanima.pt

Dublin Animation Film Festival
Dublin, Ireland
dublinanimationfilmfestival.com

Gdańsk Animation Festival
Gdańsk, Poland
animafest.pl

GIRAF
Calgary, AB
giraffest.ca

Interflim Kuki
Berlin, Germany
interflim.de

Manchester Animation Festival
Manchester, U.K.
manchesteranimationfestival.co.uk

New Chitose Airport Int'l Animation Festival
Hokkaido, Japan
airport-anifes.jp

"ONE OF THE MOST
DAZZLING
SURPRISES OF THE YEAR.
An entertaining gem full of gorgeous animation, layered storytelling, outstanding voice work and an addictive soundtrack."
NBP

"A GLOBAL CULTURAL
PHENOMENON."
The New York Times

"EMOTIONALLY
EMPOWERING.
The artwork is dynamic, elevating the storytelling and amplifying the film's themes."
RogerEbert.com

"An ode to the culture and spirit of South Korea.
A GORGEOUS
AND AFFECTING
VISUAL DISPLAY."
NEW YORK

FYC

BEST ANIMATED FEATURE
BEST ORIGINAL SONG
"GOLDEN"

K-POP DEMON HUNTERS

SONY PICTURES ANIMATION

FILM.NETFLIXAWARDS.COM

2025 ANIMATION LOVERS'

HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

Give your friends and loved ones the warmth, inspiration, nostalgia and optimism of beloved toons this season. (You know they need a little bit of all of the above this year.) Visit animationmagazine.net to get more inspiration from our monthly Must-Have Lists. **By Mercedes Milligan**

Dan Da Dan Turbo Granny Beanie
Exclusive design, 100% acrylic yarn.
Crunchyroll Store / $35

Shop Iyanu!
Find Yorubaland-inspired kids & adults apparel and merch, like this bold youth tee, at the official e-store.
shop.iyanutheseries.com / $26

Ooooo T-Shirt
A subtly cute *Elio* graphic tee for adults/kids at heart.
Disney Store / $30

Mighty Nein Fjord Stone Jacket
Stay cozy and subtly nerdy in sherpa fleece, with fun details.
Critical Role Shop / $80

Feeling Heisty Hoodie
Organic cotton fleece with kangaroo pocket, black or grey.
Wallace and Gromit Store / £45

Hazbin Hotel Season Two Soundtrack Vinyl
Vinyl variants, CD & cassette available.
Hellaverse Music / $30 / Nov. 21

Dog Man Neon Sign
Dav Pilkey's canine cop hero lights the way.
WMAT / $40

Adventure Time X Lethal Cosmetics
17-product line, all 100% vegan. $15-$65 per. Complete "Everything Burrito Bundle" $324.
lethalcosmetics.com

Gromit in the Rain Note Book
Wallace and Gromit Store / £15

SpongeBob as the Flying Dutchman Funko Pop!
Glow-in-the-dark deluxe figure.
Hot Topic / $16

40 YEARS OF STUDIO GHIBLI

My Neighbor Totoro Handbag
Tote Totoro wherever you go!
Studio Ghibli Shop / $16

Calcifer Night Light
Howl's Moving Castle's resident fire demon shares his glow.
Ghibli Store / $25

Jiji Bakery Shoes
Kiki's Deliver Service and more Ghibli movie designs available.
JD Shoes / $99

No Face Piggy Bank
Gobbles up your coins with batter-powered action!
Studio Ghibli Shop / $33

Studio Ghibli: The Complete Works (Second Edition)
An in-depth dive into all 26 feature films.
Vertical / $44 / Nov. 25

K-POP STAR SELLERS

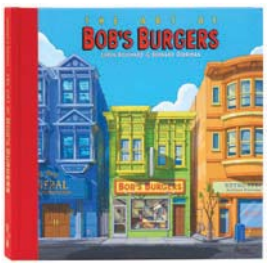
HUNTR/X Panels Shirt
A variety of designs
and apparel options available!
Hot Topic / $26

Cosplay Light Stick
Available in
HUNTR/X and Saja Boys logo designs.
Netflix Shop
$50 / Ships Dec. 4

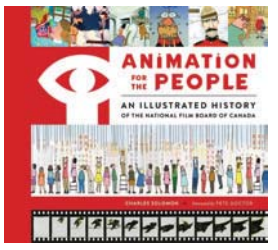
Derpy & Sussie Print
9 x 24" giclée quality,
artwork by KEHASUK.
Netflix Shop
$50 / Pre-order

BOOKS

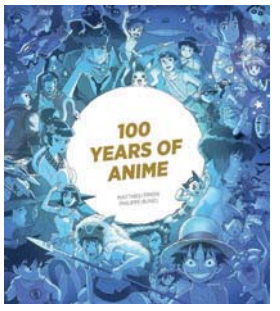
The Art of Bob's Burgers
Creator Loren Bouchard and director Bernard Derriman author this creative treasury for the long-running FOX toon. *Rizzoli / $50*



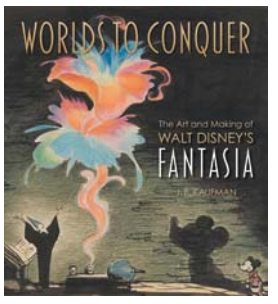
Animation for the People: An Illustrated History of the National Film Board of Canada
Written by historian/critic Charles Solomon, with foreword by Pete Docter.
Abrams / $60 / Nov. 11



100 Years of Anime
By Matthieu Pinon & Philippe Bunel, featuring full-color stills from classics to modern hits. *Insight Editions / $40*



Worlds to Conquer: The Art & Making of Walt Disney's Fantasia
By J.B. Kaufman, packed with photos, script excerpts and creator notes.
Weldon Owen / $60 / Nov. 11



Zootopia 2 Little Golden Book
Golden Books, Disney / $6

Fat Nuggets Plush
Snuggle up with your favorite pig-demon!
Youtooz / $37 (Hot Topic)

SPY X FAMILY Anya Figure
Detective version by Good Smile, 1/7 scale.
Crunchyroll Store / $190

The Bad Guys 2 Mr. Wolf Plush
Diane Foxington also available; 10".
Walmart / $12

Judy Hopps Cotton Candy Crossbody Bag
An all-too-sweet candy-colored cell phone bag with matching coin purse and delicious detail; faux leather, coordinated lining.
Loungefly / $65

75 YEARS OF PEANUTS

"Comfort and Security" Raglan Tee
Unisex, 100% cotton.
Peanuts Store / $30

Snoopy Doghouse Crossbody Bag
Vegan leather with applique, texture and print details and coordinated lining.
Loungefly / $65

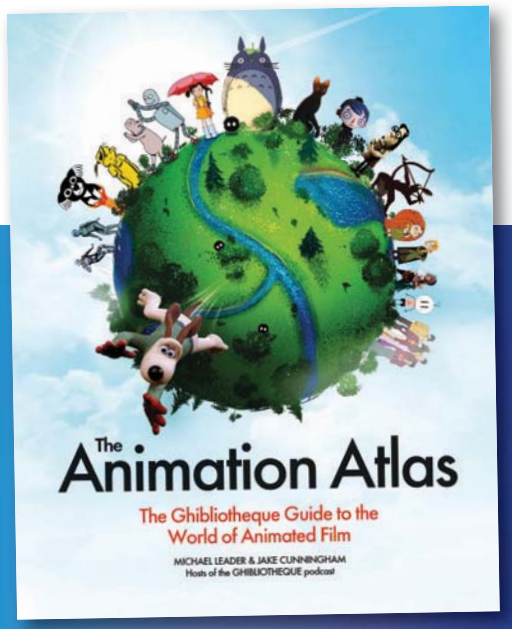
Charlie Brown Through the Decades Mug
Good grief!
What a way to start the day.
Hallmark / $20

A Charlie Brown Christmas 60th Anniversary Reissue
Vince Guaraldi's iconic soundtrack on collectible vinyl designs.
Craft Recordings / $26

The Essential Peanuts By Charles M. Schulz: The Greatest Comic Strip of All Time
By Mark Evanier. Slipcase hard-cover with 700+ images, 8 prints, 5 stickers, 8 postcards, iron-on patch, comic book and more.
Abrams / $75

Timeless Beauty

On Frédéric Back's *The Man Who Planted Trees* (Released 1987)


The
Animation Atlas
The Ghibliotheque Guide to the World of Animated Film
MICHAEL LEADER & JAKE CUNNINGHAM
Hosts of the GHIBLIOTHEQUE podcast

The following excerpt is from the beautiful new book **The Animation Atlas: The Ghibliotheque Guide to the World of Animated Film** *by Michael Leader and Jake Cunningham, hosts of the Ghibliotheque podcast. An illustrated exploration of global animation film history (published by Welbeck) the book serves as a "cartography of cartoons," with each chapter focusing on a different country to highlight local talent and films that have made a global impact.*

When Studio Ghibli co-founding director Isao Takahata was asked to lead a TV documentary about a place that inspired him (*Journey of the Heart*, 1999), he picked Canada. There, he could not only revisit sites that inspired his pre-Ghibli TV series *Anne of Green Gables*, but also meet the man he considered one of the greatest animators in the world: Frédéric Back.

Born in 1924 in Germany — well, what was technically at the time the Territory of the Saar Basin —Back moved with his family to Paris at the start of the Second World War. There he'd go on to study art, before emigrating to Canada in 1948. After working as a farmer and a teacher at a Montreal art school, he was asked to provide titles for TV shows for public broadcaster Radio-Canada in 1952. He would work there for the rest of his career.

Back's first short as director, *Abracadabra* (1970), is a vibrant vision in which multiculturalism and collaboration help save the sun from a dark thief. It has a psychedelic storybook quality, lavishly painted with the feathered tail end of the hippy era, but it was his 1978 film *All Nothing* that began his streak of more internationally acclaimed work. Telling an Eden-like tale of human vanity and violence in the face of a deity and their creations, *All Nothing* overflows with fluid, constantly shifting natural life and color, while simplifying the Almighty to pristine curves and sharp angles (not dissimilar to the heavenly counselors in Pixar's *Soul*). It scored Back his first Oscar nomination for Best Animated Short, but he left empty-handed, a fact his next film *Crac* (1981) would change.

Labor of Love

Emblematic of Back's interest in cycles of life, the Oscar-winning *Crac*'s protagonist is a rocking chair. First the wood is felled, then it is lovingly crafted into a chair that passes through eras of domesticity before being abandoned and eventually landing in a gallery. Softly illustrated and emanating warmth, Back's chair is a gift from nature to man and carves out a joyous and tragic silent fable about environmental responsibility and respect. While that film began with a tree being cut down, his next, also an Oscar winner and Back's finest work, is all about growing them.

Based on a 1953 novel of the same name, *The Man Who Planted Trees* (1987) is an extraordinary animated experience. Embracing voiceover, it tells the story of a French man who spends decades turning barren wasteland into a thriving forest by planting seeds, all by himself. Drawn delicately, it feels like it could be blown off the screen: blank space dominates the early chapters of the story, with barely shaded characters surviving through the arid minimalism. Constantly flowing between states, caught in the winds of its Provençal setting, characters, places and times disappear and evolve in moments, with the brief arrival of war dramatically thickening lines and stuttering that harmony. Eventually, as the forest begins to grow, Back's page begins to fill in, with life and color enlivening the parched screen. The short, pulsing strokes evoke Pointillism and become a natural carnival in celebration of a humble act of environmental kindness – one that Back himself took on in reality.

Embracing the lessons of his film, Back actually planted over 26,000 trees himself. And, when Isao Takahata travelled to Canada for his documentary, after first corresponding via mail years earlier, he was able to plant a tree with the man who so inspired him — a tradition Back had with all his guests. Conversing, the two masters of the form spoke interchangeably about art and nature; Back's statement that "nature's beauty is often the work of farmers" could easily be Takahata talking about his agriculturally underscored (and underrated) *Only Yesterday* (1991), while Takahata's belief in the "tremendous life force of trees" is key to Back's life and work.

What's the *Crac*? Back's 1981 short film follows the unlikely protagonist of a rocking chair through its lifecycle.

Natural Beauty: Considered to be Frédéric Back's masterpiece, *The Man Who Planted Trees* is based on Jean Gionot's 1953 novella. Narrated by Christopher Plummer (English version) and Philippe Noiret (French version), it won the Oscar for Best Animated Short in 1988.

Back would make one more film before retiring, *The Mighty River* (1993), an animated documentary about Canada's St. Lawrence River, which explores its biological and topographic history, its symbiotic relationship to humanity and eventually its exploitation. After expressing his philosophy through fable and suggestion, he signed off from filmmaking more directly, maintaining his signature animated flow in which time, space and geography can collapse in an instant, but asking (via an English-language voiceover from Donald Sutherland) if the literal flow into environmental disrepair can be avoided. It's a question still asked three decades later. Back died in 2013, but the power of his films endures, creatively and politically, with the internet (and perhaps this book) allowing more people to discover him, share his work and become even more trees in his forest. ■

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

BEST ANIMATED SHORT FILM

The Girl Who Cried Pearls

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SOUND DESIGN OLIVIER CALVERT ART DIRECTION BRIGITTE HENRY PRODUCERS JULIE ROY, MARC BERTRAND, CHRISTINE NOËL EXECUTIVE PRODUCER CHRISTINE NOËL

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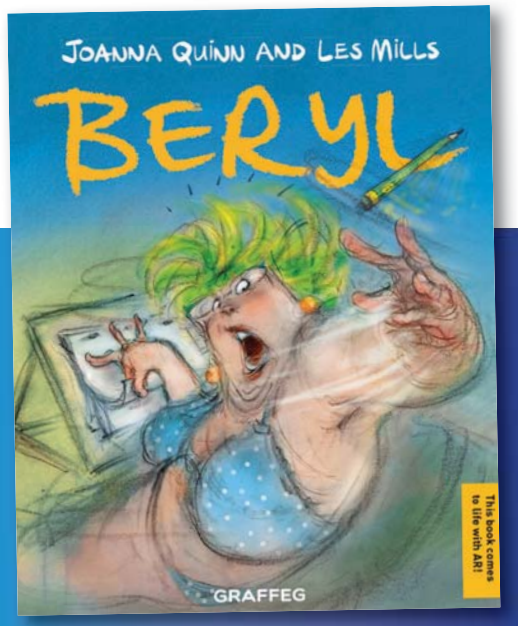
Rediscovering Beryl

Oscar-nominated animation artist Joanna Quinn revisits the creation of her most iconic character.



In the charming new art book **Beryl** *by acclaimed Oscar-nominated director Joanna Quinn and Les Mills (Graffeg Books, 190 Pages, $40) readers are invited to dive into the beloved artists' creative process. Featuring a wide variety of sketches, storyboards, final artwork and entertaining and insightful commentary from both Joanna and Les, this must-have volume also includes a scene-by-scene adaptation of the Oscar-nominated short* Affairs of the Art. *The following is an excerpt from this delightful publication:*

Before even starting the storyboard, Joanna explores the scenes as quick thumb nails in sketchbooks, working with Les to get the most impactful angles and dramatic effect. Once a decision is made as a thumbnail, Joanna tries to stay true to that original sketch all the way to the final-colored film frame.

The scene with Beverly and her dead grandmother is a good example of this. You can see how the original sketch translates into the storyboard frame and then the final animation. Joanna has learnt to try and make all the scene planning decisions in sketchbooks and finalise them in the storyboard so she can solely concentrate on emotion and movement of the character when doing the animation. Making an animated film is very complicated, full of interlocking problems, so the more problems you sort at the beginning the better. This is something Joanna learnt, doing years of commercials to strict deadlines. A decision is made, then move on to the next decision, decide what to do then move on — never go backwards, just keep moving forward.

Joanna Goes Digital

I started work on *Affairs of the Art* back in about 2015 and I had been playing around with an animation software called TVPaint which omitted the use of paper altogether. We bought a Cintiq, which is a computer screen that lies flat so you can draw onto the screen directly. I started to get excited at the prospect of creating a digitally animated and colored film, with all the textures and organic feel of a hand-drawn film. I was going to amaze and startle people when I would inform them that the film was in fact, 100% digital! So, I set off full of enthusiasm ready to prove the doubters wrong. I learnt the basics of the software and just started animating. At first it was so enjoyable because it was a whole new experience

I soldiered on animating on my Cintiq, but I just couldn't seem to get the fluidity I was trying to achieve. I thought it would eventually come as I became more confident animating this way, so I persevered for the next six months. During this time, we were invited to the lovely festival in Fredrikstad, Norway, where I was to have a retrospective. Also attending was the great Richard Williams and his equally great wife and producer, Mo Sutton. As a beautiful gesture of 2D comradery, Richard gifted me a set of his favorite Blackwing colored pencils, for me to use on the new film. I felt like a traitor as I'd already made the decision to join the digital camp. I chose not to tell him just then!

I also received an email from the great Regina Pessoa — the Portuguese queen of animation — who begged me not to go digital. She made a passionate plea and said the Quinn line was unique and should stay pencil. A very surprising and very kind email, but with firm Portuguese honesty. A British person would never have done that. As thought provoking as it was, I still thought I could prove even Queen Regina wrong.

And then the day came when I finally threw in the towel. I had completed the opening scene of *Affairs of the Art* and showed Les the final animation pass. Les, always my biggest critic, said he thought it just wasn't working,

Joanna Quinn and Les Mills

that the animation was stiff and still lacked the fluidity of line associated with my animation work. He told me there was no shame in abandoning the Cintiq and going back to paper. More importantly he noticed I wasn't very happy — he was right!

The act of animating digitally was a constant challenge for me. I never felt completely in control and never felt it was flowing out of me like when I work on paper. When I draw with pencil on paper, it's very intuitive because it's a simple direct message from the brain to the arm. The single pencil can create a line of many qualities depending on the angle of the lead and pressure from the hand. It takes you on a journey that you can push you into unplanned directions and gives constant pleasure. The computer, on the other hand, must be told what to do, and each decision and press of a button takes you away from the intuitive process where you get lost in the enjoyment of the line. This was my Damascene moment. I thought, 'Sod it, I'm animating the film on paper!' The weight was lifted off my shoulders, and I blew the dust of my trusty old lightbox. I'd rather be old fashioned and happy than cutting-edge and miserable. Les, Richard and Queen Regina had won. ■

Beryl is Born

Having learned much from the narrative possibilities of her comic strips, Joanna was now eager to explore character development and the short story as a springboard to developing more meaningful and universal themes.

She had always enjoyed the company of middle-aged women – her mum's friends, relatives and strangers. She would listen and acutely observe the women around her and it intrigued her how women with some of the harshest lives seemed to have the biggest hearts and the ability to laugh their troubles away. Thus, Joanna was inspired to choose an older, ordinary, middle-aged woman as the unlikely central character in *Girls Night Out*.

First sketches of the Beryl character.

Raised mainly by her divorced single mother, Joanna likely modelled Beryl after her – someone who struggled but always laughed, fighting adversity to provide stability and security.

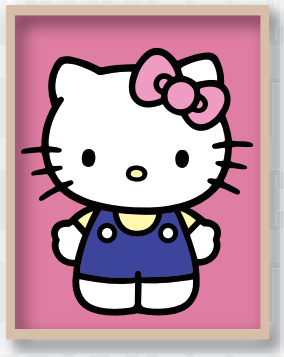
Joanna's mother was very funny and somewhat of a performer herself. She was great fun to be with and was always enjoying life with friends. Another possible inspiration for Beryl was a middle-aged woman who worked in the cafeteria of Joanna's university. She looked rather like Beryl and was the same rotund, mother-like and caring character. She acted as an oasis for the students, many of whom were sometimes overwhelmed by the pressures of being in the intimidating cool and trendy atmosphere of a London art college with a fearsome fashion department! She was very warm, popular and gregarious, much loved by all the students.

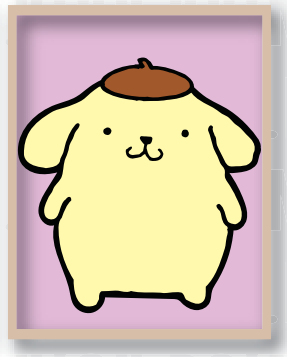
It was a combination of all these strong women characters in her life and the women she met working in factories that undoubtedly provoked the genesis of Beryl.

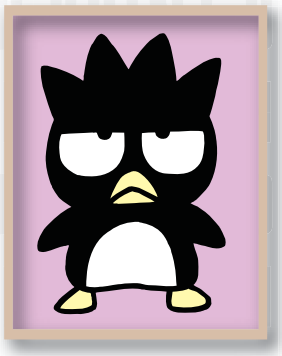
The actual name 'Beryl' was chosen because it represented a very popular British working-class name from the 1940s and 50s. Names like Doris, Ethel, Elsie and Doreen were also considered, but the name Beryl seemed to fit her perfectly, and so she was christened Beryl!

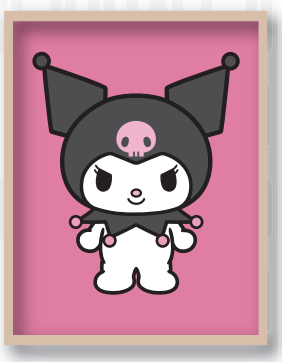
56 Beryl

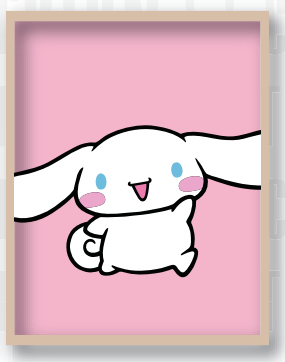
Beryl is Born 57

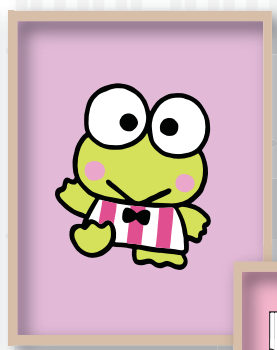


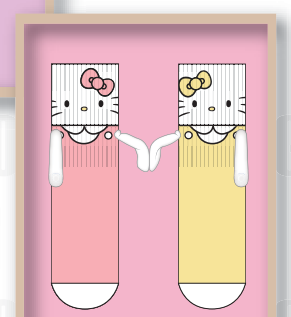












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The World ANIMATION Summit

NOVEMBER 17-19 2025

For the past 13 years, *Animation Magazine* has hosted the star-studded World Animation Summit in Los Angeles, attracting some of the biggest names working in the industry to this event. We continue this wonderful tradition once again this year (November 17-19) at the boutique North Hollywood hotel, The Garland. We hope you can join us as we celebrate the artists and executives behind animation's most iconic titles and enduring classics — as well as meeting a raft of esteemed industry speakers and attending a series of must-see panels.

Welcome to the 2025 World Animation Summit!

'It is my opinion that we don't know who and what we don't know until we reach out and explore. The reward for this effort is exponential. It is such a joy to step away from our screens and be surprised at what we find in the real world.'

Welcome to the 13th edition of our World Animation Summit. We are so happy that we're able to host our annual event where like-minded souls gather to explore the future of our fast-changing industry and exciting new business opportunities together.

Our line-up of sessions, keynotes and awards are curated to inspire, inform and intrigue you. We hope that over these short three days, you will be able to take the time to meet everyone who will be here. It is my opinion that we don't know who and what we don't know until we reach out and explore. The reward for this effort is exponential. It is such a joy to step away from our screens and be surprised at what we find in the real world.

My wonderful staff works hard and long to put this event together. Our talented duo of Kim Derevlany and Ramin Zahed imagine and program your sessions with utmost care. The rest of our *Animation Magazine* team — Jan Bayouth, Mercedes Milligan, Damaso Aberjan, Sam Selvaggio, Sheri Shelton, Francis Klaess and Lucy Aberjan — all bring their expertise to this annual event as well.

Of course, the Summit would not be possible without the fabulous Jan Nagel and her amazing crew of 50 volunteers. A special thanks goes out to Heather Gaberman and all the other individuals who step away from their jobs and take the time to support their fearless leader Kim who has run the show for the past 13 years.

Thank you to all of you for being here, and especially to our amazing sponsors for your support and contributions, to celebrate and further our awesome industry!

All my very best,

Jean Thoren

Publisher, *Animation Magazine* &
Founder, The World Animation Summit

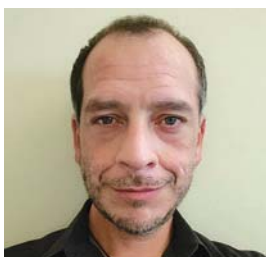
Visit **animationmagazine.net/summit** to purchase your discounted tickets today.

Animation Magazine's 2025 Hall Of Fame Award Honorees

Loren Bouchard
Creator
Bob's Burgers

Maggie Kang & Chris Appelhans
Directors, *KPop Demon Hunters*
Movie of the Year Award

Fumi Kitahara
Animation Publicity Executive
Posthumous



Juan Jose Meza-León
Director, *Aztec Batman: Clash of Empires*
New Vision Award

Tim Miller
Creator/Exec Producer
Love, Death + Robots, Secret Level

Linda Simensky
Animation Creative Executive
Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, PBS

Matt Stone & Trey Parker
Creators, *South Park*

Studio 100 International
International Studio of the Year

Alex Woo
Director, *In Your Dreams*
New Vision Award

Hosted by Eric Bauza
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The World ANIMATION Summit

SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE

MONDAY, NOVEMBER. 17

8:30 **Registration and Networking Breakfast**
All-day coffee bar sponsored by Sony Pictures Animation

10:00 **Creative Keynote:** Delicious and Super Magical Recipes for Animation Success with Jorge R. Gutierrez

10:25 **Creative Keynote:** Bold, New Adventures in Storytelling and World Building with Dana Terrace.

11:00 **TBA**

12:00 **Working with Global Partners: New Paradigms and Practices**
Saraswathi Vani Balgam, Dancing Atoms
Aaron Behl, Atomic Cartoons
Frank Falcone, Guru Studio
Aaron Berger, Chatrone
David Michel, Cottonwood
Moderator: Sander Schwartz, Sandman Films

1:00 **Networking Lunch**

2:30 **Will the Next Bluey Please Wag Your Tail**
Dete Meserve, Apple TV's *Not a Box*
Bryan O'Connell, The Jim Henson Company
Jessica Rapsas, Disney Jr.'s *Super Kitties*
Vanessa Taylor Sands, Dreamworks
Moderator: Karen Idelson

3:30 **Awards Features Contenders, Part I**
Carrie Liao, *Zootopia 2*
Peter Hastings, *Dog Man*
Maggie Kang & Chris Appelhans, *KPop Demon Hunters*
Ugo Bienvenu, *Arco*

4:30 **Awards Features Contenders, Part II**
Alex Woo**,** *In Your Dreams*
Pierre Perifel, *The Bad Guys 2*
Derek Drymon, *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants*
Dave Jesteadt, *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain*
Mamoru Hosoda, *Scarlet*

5:30 **Opening Night Cocktail Party**
Sponsored by Claynosaurz

7:30 **The 2025 Hall of Fame Awards Gala**
Hosted by Eric Bauza

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 18

8:00 **Networking Breakfast**
Sponsored by Animation Scotland

10:00 **Creative Keynote:** Next Stop, Exandria, with Sam Riegel, Travis Willingham and Tasha Huo (Prime Video's *The Mighty Nein)*

10:25 **Creative Keynote:** Koyalee Chanda, senior VP of animation at Lion Forge and Emmy-winning writer Kerri Grant discuss the creation of the acclaimed series *Iyanu*.

11:00 **Women Who Lead: A Conversation with Three Impactful Animation Studio Heads**
Kristine Belson, Sony Pictures Animation
Margie Cohn, DreamWorks Animation
Hannah Minghella, Netflix Feature Animation

12:00 **Inside the Mad, Mad World of Adult Animation**
Alex Rubens, *Krapopolis*
Mike Hollingsworth, Low Tide Cartoon

1:00 **Networking Lunch**
Sponsored by the British Consulate - Los Angeles

2:30 **The New British Animation Invasion**

3:30 **How We Got Our Show Made, Against All Odds!**
Emily Brundige (*Goldie, Pubertina*)
Genevieve LeDoux (*Star Forest*, *Tumble Leaf*)

4:30 **The Animation Professional's Survival Guide: Practical Tips on Thriving in an Unpredictable Industry**
Julie Pistor (Upcoming *Moomins* feature)
Gregg Taylor (*In Your Dreams*)
Marge Dean (*Invincible)*
Joe Sichta, Public Pixels Media
Moderator: Rita Street, Radar Cartoons

5:30 **The Colombian Creative Connection**
Carlos Duque, Katapix Media
Felipe Fierro, Pigmalion Animation Studio
Julián Sánchez, Dinamita Animación
Peter Lopez, IKartoon
David Andrés Mesa Parra, Bombillo Amarillo Studios
Camila Gómez, Team Toon
Alejandro Londono, ProColombia

6:30 **Cocktail Party**
Sponsored by Colombia, the Country of Beauty

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 19

8:00 **Networking Breakfast**
Sponsored by JALI

10:00 **Creative Keynote:** Claynosaurz co-founder and CCO Nicholas Cabana takes us through the fascinating and meteoric rise of the animation company and shares his views on the possibilities of the new indie universe.

11:00 **AI Myth Busters: How to Empower Artists and Storytellers with New Creative Tools**
Eric Oldrin, Nirdlo
Nik Kleverov, Native Foreign
Kyle Jolly, Scriptsee
Moderator: Justine Bannister

12:00 **Finding Success in a "Digital First" World**
Nic Cabana, Claynosaurz
Adam Walters, English Tree TV
Sherry Gunther Sugerman, Producer
Cory Williams, Daydream Studios
Moderator: Elie Dekel, Dekel Brands

1:00 **Celebrating the Magic of LAIKA at 20.**
This spotlight on the innovative Portland studio's special milestone features a look at the making of the new CG-animated *ParaNorman* short, *The Thrifting,* and a conversation with *ParaNorman* and *Missing Link* writer-director Chris Butler.

2:00 **Networking Lunch & Cocktail Party**
Sponsored by LAIKA

4:15 **Award Season Shorts Sampler Screening**
Cardboard, Éiru, Snow Bear, Playing God, Wednesdays With Gramps, Versa, Forevergreen, Retirement Plan

5:45 **Shorts Contenders in the Spotlight**
Malcon Pierce, *Versa*
Damian Perea, *Playing God*
J.P. Vine, *Cardboard*
Nathan Engelhardt, *Forevergreen*
Aaron Blaise, *Snow Bear*
Giovanna Ferrari, *Éiru*
Shabrayia Cleaver, *Wednesdays With Gramps*
Moderator: Brooke Keesling

Visit **animationmagazine.net/summit** to purchase your discounted tickets today.

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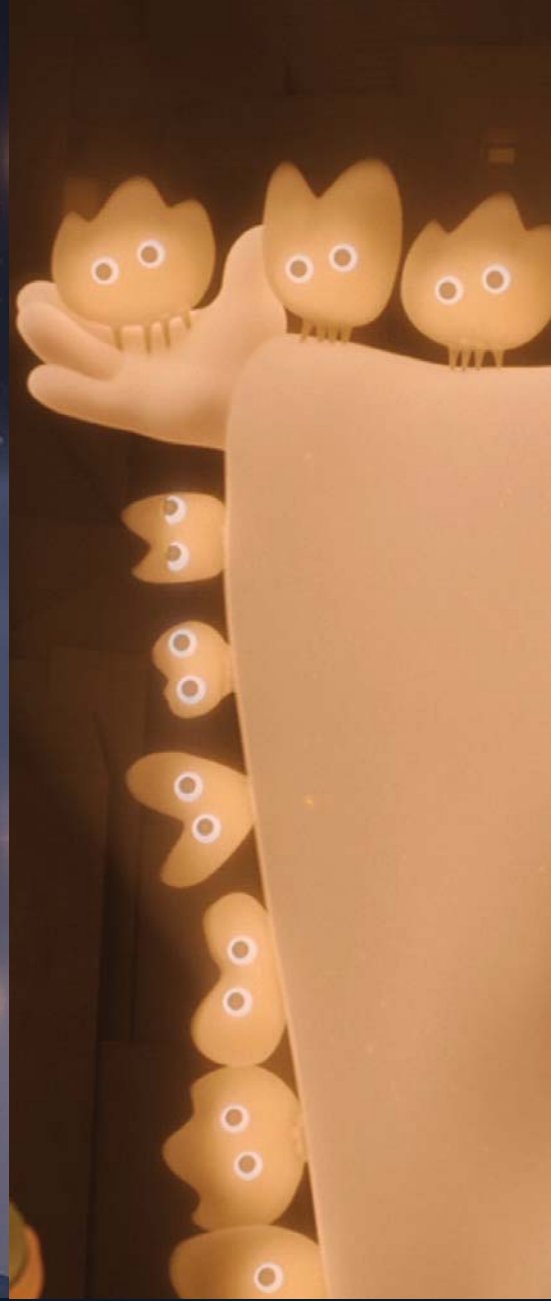


HYPSCHOOL

A LITTLE NIGHT MAGIC

How writer-director Alex Woo and his team sprinkled their brilliant artistic vision into Netflix's beautifully crafted movie *In Your Dreams*

By Karen Idelson

Though we might chase our dreams with real passion, believing and hoping they'll be realized, not every one of them will come true. And at that point, we'll inevitably wonder: what's next?

This is where *In Your Dreams*, the new film from director Alex Woo, a former Pixar storyboard artist (*Ratatouille, WALL-E, Incredibles 2* and *Finding Dory*), takes us. We follow Stevie and her little brother Elliot through two worlds — an edgy, imperfect reality and a fantasy landscape — as they try to bring them together and live the perfect lives they desperately want.

"What started the movie was this question of: What do you do when your dreams don't necessarily come true?" says Woo. "I think that's so much a part of life, how do you find a way forward [amid the] uncertainty and unknown? That was sort of the thing that kept coming back to me and that was sort of the throughline of the film. But we also wanted to make sure it was really fun, and that you just enjoyed every single second of the film. And so that was also a challenge, but in a way that's really fun and entertaining."

The film, co-directed by Erik Benson, is the first animated feature from Woo's Berkeley, Calif.-based KuKu Studios, which he co-founded in 2016 with fellow former Pixar employees Stanley Moore and Tim Hahn and which produced Netflix's preschool show *Go! Go! Cory Carson*. Woo developed the story for this film and co-wrote the screenplay with Benson and Moore.

The director's team includes VFX supervisor and director of CG supervision at Sony Pictures Imageworks Nicola Lavender, head of character animation Sacha Kapijimpanga (*Over the Moon*), two-time Academy Award-winning

Visual Appeal: Alex Woo's studio Kuku was named after the Chinese word "ku," meaning cry. He says he wanted to tell stories that would make audiences cry tears of laughter and pathos. He believes in letting the style of an animated project emerge from the story itself.

production designer Steve Pilcher (*Soul*) and producers Tim Hahn and Netflix Animation co-founder Gregg Taylor. There's also a powerhouse voice cast featuring Jolie Hoang-Rappaport, Elias Janssen, Craig Robinson, Simu Liu, Cristin Milioti, Omid Djalili, Gia Carides, SungWon Cho and Zachary Noah Piser, among others.

Straddling Two Distinct Worlds

Woo says that the animation and storytelling had to reflect two worlds — a dream world and the real world. The director and his creative team set out to make each world seem unique so viewers could easily distinguish one from the other.

"It was important to us that the real world seem grounded for the audience and the characters," says Woo. "We needed to ground the design of the real world so that there was somewhere for us to go when we got to the dream world. We also played some tricks on the audience, where you think you're in the real world, but you're in the dream world. Again, you needed that contrast. But it comes back to the theme of the movie, which is that reality is imperfect, reality is messy, and it's not perfectly [a] straight line and straight edges. You know, things are dirty, but that's the beauty of reality. So, it was very deliberate to have all these sorts of tactile imperfections when you see them."

"I wanted to show that, like life, dreams can have a dark side to them. If you focus too much on them, you can kind of miss the reality that's sort of right in front of your eyes."

WRITER-DIRECTOR-PRODUCER ALEX WOO

As production designer, Pilcher collaborated closely with Woo to ensure that audiences could tell the worlds apart as the two young characters travel back and forth.

"You wanted to make sure that it's clear to the audience when you're in the real world or the dream world," says Pilcher. "When I look at the story, I don't necessarily think about stylistic considerations right off the bat. I think about what the story is asking for, and that will tell me how to stylistically approach things. So, in this film, because we have a real world and a dream world, you want to make sure that sometimes when you're in the dream world, it feels like you're still in the real world. This makes the dream world more convincing. I made sure that the real world was relatable and fun and tactile. When we go to the dream world, it's different. The characters can do what they want, the rules are different."

According to the film's head of character animation, Kapijimpanga, the most challenging character was Nightmara, a powerful phantom who lives in that dream world.

"We knew she was going to be a challenge because she was pretty effects-heavy as well," says Kapijimpanga. "She was so complicated that we could have started working on her on the first day, and we still would have been working on her till the end. There were little changes in terms of what she was going to be saying in the movie, in the direction of her character a little bit, until late in production.

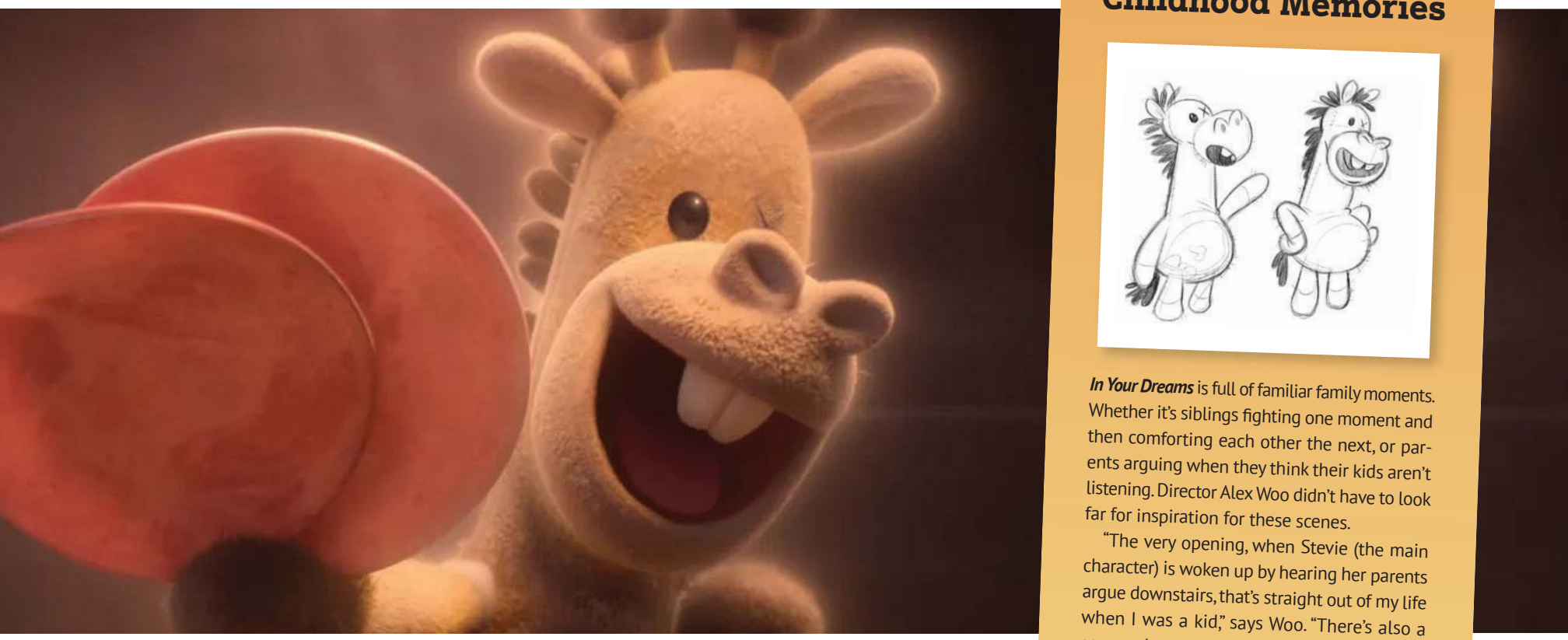
"We ended up really doing a lot of the work in Maya in the last four months of the movie," he adds. "We had some development work before that, but there was a lot of collaboration that had to happen between all the departments because she's so effects-heavy that you can't represent her with a regular body geometry. So, you have to figure out how to show all that stuff in a way that can be directed. It was a lot of, like, back and forth between departments. That was probably the most collaborative character, I think."

Nicola Lavender

Sacha Kapijimpanga

Lavender, the film's VFX supervisor, agrees that Nightmara brought on many complications but says that Sandman, another character who lives in the dream world and is made of sand, added to the mix of challenges.

"We did use existing software packages for Sandman and Nightmara, though; it was more shaders that we used in there to make sure that we had the control that we needed," says Lavender. "There were a lot of aspects of the dream world that were also very complicated, like all the sand around them, the sandcastle that's so huge, and then the Sandman himself, which is much smaller, and then even [the] little, smaller characters made of sand. We spent time making sure that the shaders that we had could manage those different scales and allow us to kind of layer in all the detail that we needed. We spent a lot of time mainly working with the shader department to kind of add features and to allow us to use those features in different ways to show emotion and action."



Embracing the Yin and Yang

In the dream world, main characters Stevie and Elliot don't always encounter safe spaces or friends. Both Sandman and Nightmara force them into struggles. And this all worked toward Woo's ultimate goal.

"I wanted to show that, like life, dreams can have a dark side to them," says Woo. "If you focus too much on them, you can kind of miss the reality that's sort of right in front of your eyes. Even though it's messy and it's complicated, it's real, and that's what life is. The messiness that happens in life makes [you] grow. People spend so much time on social media, projecting out into the world these fake, perfect lives. I get caught up in this too. You almost want to create a perfect dream life for yourself, and then you want to put that out into the world. You're missing out on the reality and all the goodness and richness of real life." ■

A Joyful Giraffe: The filmmakers put a lot of love into crafting the beloved stuffed giraffe, Baloney Tony (voiced by Craig Robinson). There's a darker patch on the left side of the character where all the fur has been worn off, which is a stain from slices of bologna!

***In Your Dreams* premieres Nov. 14 on Netflix.**

Baloney Tony and Other Childhood Memories

In Your Dreams is full of familiar family moments. Whether it's siblings fighting one moment and then comforting each other the next, or parents arguing when they think their kids aren't listening. Director Alex Woo didn't have to look far for inspiration for these scenes.

"The very opening, when Stevie (the main character) is woken up by hearing her parents argue downstairs, that's straight out of my life when I was a kid," says Woo. "There's also a scene where Stevie watches her mom drive away to Duluth for an interview, and that also was straight out of my life."

In the film, Stevie and her brother Elliot also share a stuffed animal they've named Baloney Tony, because they use a rip in his side to store lunch meat. This also came from a moment in the director's life.

"My brother didn't exactly have a Baloney Tony, but my aunt bought us these matching stuffed bears. They were called Santa bears, and they were from the local department store. And my brother had, like, a bloody nose one night and he wiped his nose on the bear, around his tail. I would always make fun of him for it, but he just still loved the bear, and it was his bear, so he didn't want to get rid of it and still slept with it. I wanted to bring that sense of closeness between two kids to the movie. My little brother also always wanted to come over to my side of the room when we shared a bedroom. When you see Elliot following Stevie around and trying to get in her space, it comes from the experiences I had with my brother. You also see how they can depend on each other when they're worried or scared in the story." ■

Animal Planet: Described as one of the most complicated and biggest Disney productions to date, *Zootopia 2* includes a shot that features 50,000 animals on the screen at the same time!

BACK TO THE URBAN JUNGLE

How the team behind Disney's holiday feature *Zootopia 2* brought back the fox and rabbit duo for another entertaining adventure.

By Jeff Spry

For those of us of a certain age (or kids with cool parents) who grew up with works like Richard Scarry's cherished children's books depicting a colorful cast of anthropomorphic animals living in Busytown, 2016's animated sensation *Zootopia* was a nostalgic dream made manifest.

Even though it's been nine years since Disney's Oscar-winning hit helmed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (from a script by Jared Bush and Phil Johnson) took audiences by storm with its Noah's Ark-sized menagerie of cohabitating critters, we're still in awe of its indelible world.

Now the Academy Award-winning directing duo of Howard and Bush (*Encanto*), this time with acclaimed producer Yvett Merino (*Moana 2*, *Big Hero 6*), are back delivering the "wow factor" with *Zootopia 2*. Walt Disney Animation Studios' $150-million sequel follows plucky bunny detective Judy Hopps (Ginnifer Goodwin) as she partners with the sly red fox Nick Wilde (Jason Bateman) for an undercover case to locate a mysterious blue serpent named Gary De'Snake (Ke Huy Quan) who's been stirring up trouble in Zootopia.

"Something we wanted to do heading into this story is make sure we knew not just what we're excited about, but what's everybody else excited about," Jared Bush, co-director and chief creative officer of Walt Disney Animation Studios, tells *Animation Magazine*. "Now that we understand this world of animals, what else is out there and what's the most interesting way to show that? The movie feels more expansive. It's unbelievably beautiful because we have the luxury of working with the greatest artists on the planet; people at the top of their craft wanting to push what's possible."

Carnival of Animals

Zootopia 2 is filled to the max with frolicking fauna. Bush believes the film includes by far the most speaking parts of any Disney movie ever, nearing an astonishing 70 roles.

"We're all animal nerds," adds Bush. "We love animals. One of the really fun things is, who along the way can Nick and Judy run into that will be entertaining for their relationship and push up against them?"

There's a measurable leap in the animation quality here too, thanks to Pixar's Presto 3D software, and the fun flick is sure to be one of the brightest spots on Hollywood's holiday season calendar. Conjuring up the magic of *Zootopia 2* required an all-out group effort.

"Every week we're shocked and amazed at what they can produce," Howard adds. "The movie is absolutely enormous. It's the biggest movie we've ever done in the history of Disney animation, which is saying something. The first movie was complex and layered and immersive, and this one is even more so. Everyone has just stepped it up. The artistry is mind-boggling."

Merino notes that one of the benefits of working at Walt Disney Animation is that the studio works with the same team on every project, so it really is a brain trust coming together and doing its best.

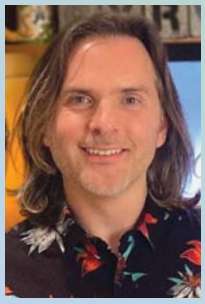
"They all work so hard here and they're such amazing artists," the *Encanto* Oscar winner says. "It really is the best of the best doing what they do. Our job is to guide them and give them what they need to do it, and then they just go."

Burrowing into Zootopia's vibrant world, the talented animation crew steered the narrative into some unexplored corners of the bustling metropolis.

Heads Above the Water

"One of the most exciting new areas we get to visit is called Marsh Market," Howard shares. "This is a part of town made for semiaquatic and marine animals. We didn't get to see that neighborhood in the first film. There's no human-world equivalent to the way that animals live there. You go to Tundratown, which is where it's cold and you wear a coat. Or if you go to Sahara Square and you know it's going to feel hot, so you know what to do there. But an environment where animals live equally above and below water needs to go back and forth seamlessly. Knowing this is a place the animals built for themselves, it's almost an alien world."

"There's conveyor belts that take them in and out of the water," he adds. "There are buildings that are below water, above water; there are swim-up bars. All kinds of things where it's tailor-made for animals that are in the water. Which is great for Nick and Judy, because they haven't spent time there. In the first film, Nick was somewhat the ambassador of the city to Judy, so he could show her all the places he knew. He's never been to this spot before and it's definitely not designed for land animals, so it really puts them



ZOOTOPIA 2 DIRECTOR BYRON HOWARD

"It's the biggest movie we've ever done in the history of Disney animation, which is saying something. Just the variety of characters, and not just with fur but characters with fur and costumes. We've got one shot that features 50,000 animals on the screen at the same time!"

at a disadvantage, which gives us a lot of fun discomfort."

Bush compares this whimsical realm to being a kid and imagining what an animal world might be like, and those types of crazy drawings or wild ideas that daydreaming youth often indulge in.

"The transport tubes, [which] are such a big part of what the story is this time around, make sense if you're a seal or a walrus or a hippo getting shot through those things," he explains. "It's the perfect way to get from one part of town to the other. The storytelling itself and the world begs you to have fun and really go next level and do things that are so imaginative."

"*The Jungle Book* is the first Disney movie I remember seeing in theaters and it stuck with me forever," says Bush. "The really fun characters and the music, that was what made me want to be a part of this. There's a reason why Disney has this great legacy, and we did try to learn from that. I think we all have an old-fashioned sensibility while we're telling these movies in modern times. There's a math to some of these things sometimes, comedy specifically. Ingredients you need to set up correctly in order for jokes to pay off that hopefully everyone in the world will like."

Part of the remarkable magic of *Zootopia 2* is due to the move from Maya animation software to the upgraded Presto system, and the results are nothing less than stunning, with enhanced depth of field, color palette, lighting effects, fur texturing and reflective surfaces. Presto's advanced features also allowed for cross-departmental conversations and synchronous troubleshooting.

Presto Perfection

"A lot of credit goes to our animation team, who really jumped in and accepted Presto changes," Merino recalls. "It's not always easy to change and switch a system they're all used to. We were able to cast and work on different characters within the same scene because we could go in and out of those sequences. It was really a great help to us."

Presto's fluid functions were necessary for a project of this magnitude, permitting animators to work concurrently, a benefit the team didn't have using the older Maya systems.

"That was something we genuinely needed because the complexity is unprecedented," claims Howard. "Just the variety of characters, and not just with fur but characters with fur and costumes. We've got one shot that features 50,000 animals on the screen at the same time!

"Gary De'Snake himself is a new thing. We have a great tradition of animated snakes at Disney, but we hadn't done one in CG so that's brand new for us. I just love looking at Gary, that beautiful blue color that Cory Loftis, our production designer, found. And Ke's voice and how distinctive that is. It's all about these tools becoming more user-friendly and more flexible and faster. Being able to handle something of this scale, we couldn't have done that five years ago." ■

DISNEY CCO AND *ZOOTOPIA 2* DIRECTOR JARED BUSH

"I think we all have an old-fashioned sensibility while we're telling these movies in modern times. There's a math to some of these things sometimes, comedy specifically."

Disney will release *Zootopia 2* in theaters nationwide on Nov. 26.

Global Expansion

Disney is banking on *Zootopia 2* being a major draw when it opens Thanksgiving Day weekend. Broadening the borders of this fascinating animal society only seemed natural after laying the foundation of Judy and Nick's relationship in 2016's *Zootopia*.

"I started in the '90s in animation, where Disney was kind of the only game in town, and then there was DreamWorks for a while," co-director Jared Bush notes. "It's global now, and a lot of people who are going to these films grew up on very sophisticated-looking animation with a lot of cinematography and very complex rendering systems, so that expectation is there. But there's also an awareness of world animation. Different styles, different treatments and different storytelling, which is great because we have a diverse crew that wants that stuff for us as well."

Disney's troop of ace animators have left it all on the drawing table and computer screens for this extraordinary sequel that revisits detectives Hopps and Wilde as they venture into a swampy corner of Zootopia to track down a sneaky snake named Gary.

"We have this luxury of all the brilliant brains that we're surrounded with constantly," co-director Byron Howard adds. "Everybody that touches any of the movies that we put out here wants to make something that's going to stand the test of time. They want to contribute to something they can tell their family about and be proud of. That's not just a movie for right now, but 10 years from now will still entertain people. Everyone is wanting these stories to be the most emotional they can be, the most fun they can be. We're constantly being inspired by those around us." ■

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TIME TRAVEL AGENT

Ugo Bienvenu

French comic-book artist and first-time feature director Ugo Bienvenu talks about envisioning better days for humanity in his highly acclaimed new movie, *Arco*.

A time-traveling 10-year-old boy from the future strikes up a friendship with a lonely young girl when he lands in the year 2075, in French illustrator-turned-director Ugo Bienvenu's assured first feature, *Arco*. The stunningly visualized 2D film won the top prize at the Annecy Festival in June and has slowly built a huge fan base among critics as it has premiered at animation events throughout the year. Produced by Bienvenu, his co-writer Felix de Givry, Sophie Mas and Natalie Portman (who also lends her voice to the English-language version of the film), *Arco* is distributed by indie darling Neon, which also championed the Oscar-nominated *Robot Dreams* (2023) and the Oscar-winning *Flee* (2022). The talented young director recently spoke to *Animation Magazine* from his home in Paris via Zoom:

By Ramin Zahed

Congratulations on the amazing success of your movie, Ugo. As we embark on a very busy awards season, can you tell us a bit about the origins of your imaginative movie?

In the beginning, I thought perhaps it could be a short. I knew that making a feature film would be long and hard, but my partner told me we must do it in long form, so we made a small trailer, and then did the writing and the boarding. We did the first drawing back in 2020, so it took us five years to complete the movie.

We met a lot of people in France, and everyone told us that it was complicated to raise more than 6 million euros, and they didn't get the script and didn't know how to read storyboards. So, after three years of working, we did the writing and storyboards. But because nobody understood how to read the storyboards, we decided to put all our money in creating a complete, very precise black-and-white animatic with subtitles. We added the music by Arnaud Toulon. We worked on that for a year and showed it to Sophie Mas and Natalie Portman of Mountain A. They decided to partner with us, and it took about three or four months to finance the whole movie. We built our studio in two weeks in Paris … with about 250 people, and we did the animation and backgrounds in about one year and two months!

You mostly used TVPaint and Photoshop, right?

Yes, we used paper for storyboards and writing. Then, we used TVPaint for the animatic and for the animation, because it's a French company also! They are also a small family company (about 10 people); we wanted to help them out as well. We used Photoshop for the backgrounds, very simple tools

I don't like the movies that use a lot of technologies; they kind of hide behind the techniques. I don't like to see a director showing off and saying, "Look at me! I am doing this amazing shot." I like to be as invisible as I can. The most important thing for me is the emotions and the simplicity. I would tell my team, "Imagine if we were making this movie in the '60s or '70s." It's made by hand, and on tablets, with limited technology. It's the same way I draw comic books. For me, the simplest way of telling stories is often the best.

You mentioned that you made the film with about 250 people. Were they all based in Paris?

We worked with three studios. There was the big house in Paris, which served as the main studio, and then we had two other locations which were both about five minutes from here. I was working all day in the studios and talking to everybody there. We had about 150 persons drawing and the rest of it was production, sound design, voice recording and all that stuff. Our financers were telling us that we should send the work to other countries that were cheaper. I wanted fewer people on the project, but I wanted them to be the best ones. I was a teacher at Gobelins school, so we hired most of my students.

You've said the COVID-19 shutdown was a bit of an inspiration for the isolated future world of *Arco*.

Yes, the idea came when the pandemic started, and I thought that we were living in such a dumb science fiction movie. In a way, I thought that science fiction produced the world we're living in today. So, maybe it's our turn to tell better stories

and imagine a better ending and a more positive future. Because if we keep depicting bad things for humans' future, then that's what we'll get. Maybe if we begin imagining the possibilities, that's the only way things can improve.

Science fiction can usually be very cynical. I remember I was pissed off too, and I thought, well, being critical and cynical isn't constructive at all. Look at ecology, that has been such a pain. We keep telling people you should do this or do that, and the exact opposite has happened. Maybe our common ecological goals can be an opportunity to bring humanity together again. Maybe this can be a way for us to fight for a common cause and fall in love. It's the only way we can work together.

Did you fall in love with comics and animation at an early age? You've mentioned Miyazaki as a big influence.

When I was seven, I discovered *Dragon Ball Z* in my grandparents' house because I couldn't watch TV in my own house as my parents didn't like it. I was blown away by that show. At the time, I was living in Chad, before we moved to Guatemala and then Mexico. (My father was a diplomat, so we moved a lot.) I thought those images were so new and so different. I thought, yes, you can do everything with drawing. So, I started to draw all the time. Then, when I was 14, I saw *Princess Mononoke,* and it felt like Miyazaki waved a magic wand like a fairy, put me under a spell and said, "You'll do animation." So, I studied animation, did animation all the time, started my own company in France when I was 23 and then formed Remembers with my partner Felix de Givry eight year later.

Because my dad was a diplomat, we were traveling to a new country every three years. I arrived in France when I was 15, learned to draw properly at École Estienne, got to Gobelins and then went to CalArts because I really wanted to see California and take classes in that school. Then, I returned to Paris to take more classes in a production school to learn how to finance movies in Europe.

Regarding my influences, beyond Miyazaki, I can mention a lot of other favorites, from *Peter Pan, Bambi* and *Casper* to *Jumanji, When Harry Met Sally...* and *Stand by Me*. There's

also the books of Marguerite Duras and Clifford D. Simak. I read a lot of Russian, French, American, Japanese literature. I rely on books much more when I'm working, because you don't want to watch anything after staring at a screen all day. With books, you are the director of the story because you can imagine everything, and you won't be influenced by someone else's vision.

***Arco* offers hope about our future on this planet when we really need it. What do you hope audiences will take away from Arco and Iris' adventure?**

That it will inspire hope a little bit in the future on humanity. I also hope that we can rely on something else besides calculation and strategic planning, because all of that is making the world worse. I think we need to reconnect with our feelings and our experiences in the world. We have to work to make the world better for us, not for machines. The movie is all about questioning our humanity, and what we leave behind because of technological progress. I also hope it brings back our confidence in the power of imagination, in having ideas, believing in small things that are drawn on a page. Big things can begin as small drawings.

Your movie seems to be the perfect antidote to the world of AI right now and where the big companies are dragging us.

It's interesting. When I have a bird in the movie, I want to use a bird's real voice. For the robot in the movie, I thought it was right to use the voice of AI. It was so perfect that it conveyed no emotion at all. That taught me a lot about what our emotions rely on. I think we really recognize ourselves in errors and imperfections. There is a very old Greek expression that translates as, "From errors comes the right." I really think for machines, it's the opposite: "From the right, comes the wrong!"

Now, we have to defend our jobs in animation, because things can be lost in one generation. Many of the jobs that we love can disappear. I love this work. I think using our imagination is the best work. We can't let machines take over the best parts of humanity, which is to dream. Imagination improves every part of our life. It colors even the small movements of our daily lives. I think it's important to say that we are magical creatures that have intuition and subconscious. We can find things that are way beyond regular calculations. They are much deeper and more complex than numerical information. We have to rely on this magic that we have inside, which is much more powerful than numbers and machines. ■

Neon opens *Arco* in U.S. theaters on Nov. 14. The film premiered in France in October.

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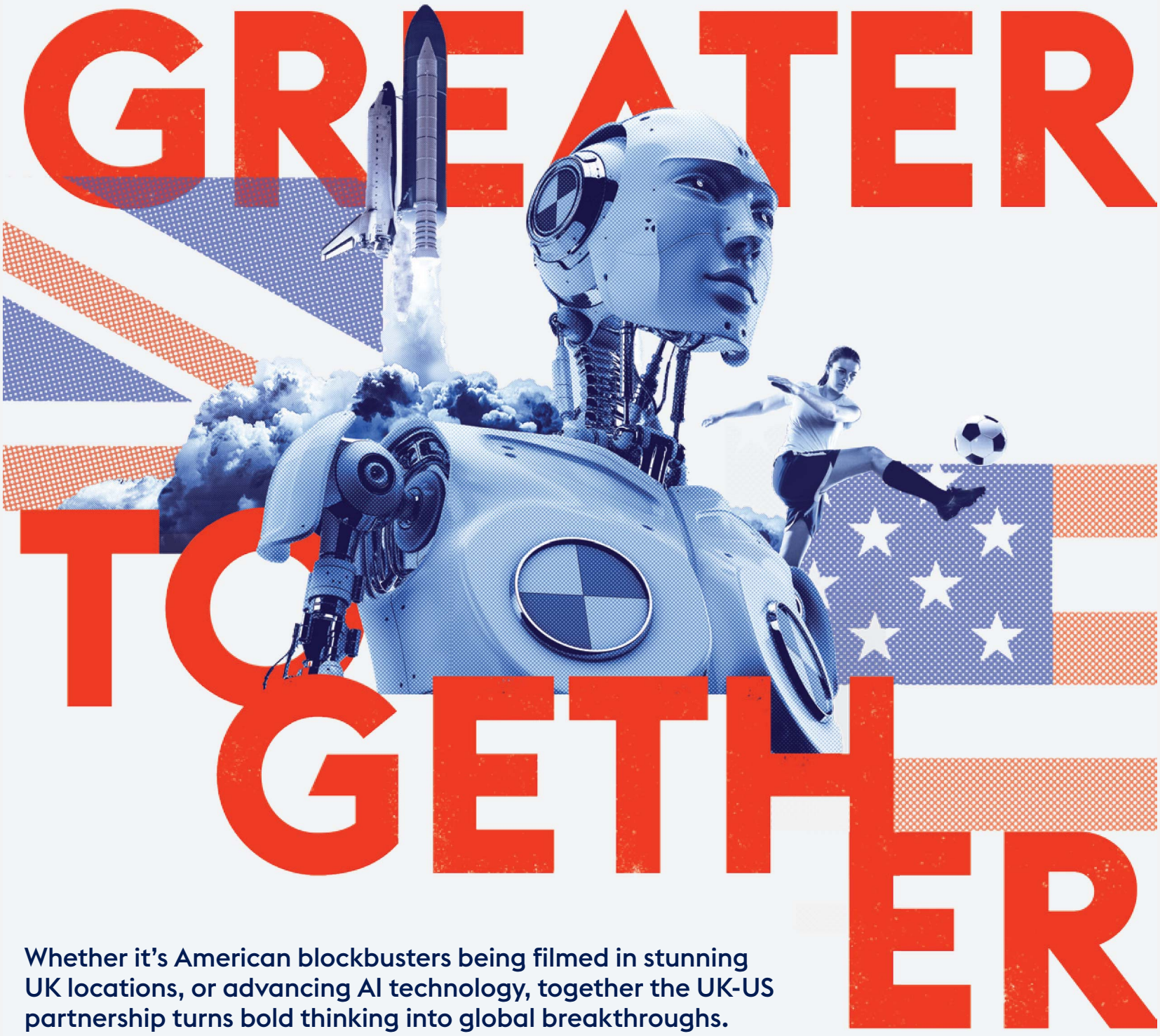

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SUPER STICKY DINOSAURS

Claynosaurz co-founder and creative director Nicholas Cabana talks about his super popular transmedia property that has made $11 million in total revenue (and $40 million in NFT trade royalties) by its third year.

It's a *Claynosaurz* world — we just live in it! The story of how the popular dino transmedia property launched by animators Nicholas Cabana and Daniel Cabral exploded into becoming a multi-million property after being introduced in the NFT space a few years ago has become an instant creator economy legend. As Cabana recently told the audience at a packed VIEW Conference session in Italy, "Our mantra was … we're going to meet the audiences where they're at, which is everywhere. Entertainment is clearly nonlinear now and distribution is free!"

We recently caught up with Cabana, a talented Annie-nominated animation supervisor and VFX artist before founding *Claynosaurz*, to learn more about the secrets of his phenomenal success and his take on the current boom in self-distributed animated content.

Can you tell us a little bit about your background in animation?

I started my career at Sony Animation & Imageworks. Eventually, I transitioned to VFX and creature animation. That's where my passion was. It's the films that pulled me in … dinosaurs, monsters, *Lord of the Rings*.

I've since worked at MPC, Image Engine, Rodeo FX and Framestore, on tentpole films like *Jurassic World*, *Paddington 2*, *Fantastic Beasts*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, *Suicide Squad* (for which I was nominated for an Annie) and have been an animation supervisor leading teams on projects like *Paddington 2*, *Game of Thrones*, *His Dark Materials* and *Fantastic Beasts 2*.

I've also worked with recording artists like Kaytranada on award-winning music videos — and that was mostly for fun!

Take us back to the beginning of _Claynosaurz_, and your big 'Aha!' moment about the new age of animation!

We started this as an idea — that we could challenge the traditional IP launch models, but also take back control for artists. We knew that studios were taking less and less risks on greenlighting original ideas. We were just

a bunch of crazy animators and artists from just about everywhere … Illumination, DreamWorks, Sony, Framestore, Disney, Ubisoft … you name it! We felt that we *knew* what resonates with audiences, but we never truly felt seen. We wanted to prove a point. Some of us were perpetually online or on social media, observing shifts in how people consumed content.

So we thought, why not launch with just characters (avatars) as digital-collectibles and a creator-first narrative, as our initial crowdfund mechanism? But we also felt that collectibles could be a great way to create a deeper relationship with those early patrons. Because they're digital, you can create experiences around them, add loyalty loops and even cast those avatars and community members as characters in our content!

In our first release, we sold out and crashed the website, for 1.3 million. That was a huge milestone for us! And we realized, "Okay, people really do like these!"

"With newer internet technology that allows for ownership, instead of animators being paid once for their labor, the work they create can actually hold value and continue to generate it. That's never been possible before."
***CLAYNOSAURZ* CO-FOUNDER AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR NICHOLAS CABANA**

We held community events with huge attendance. Met the fans! It was crazy! But we still had to test our product. Our characters. The big Aha! moment was when we released our first shorts on social media, and it went viral, hitting millions of views organically.

Why do you think *Claynosaurz* made it so big when other similar properties crashed and burned?
We're a fan-first company. We co-create and invite them into the journey of building a brand. We leverage on-chain digital collectibles to nurture deeper connections with early fans as well, whether through experiences we can offer or a feeling of ownership. We believe the future lies in community-driven franchising and that community is the mote in over-competitive landscapes. And as a transmedia brand we explore many different expressions through ages and stages. Many stories in different places.

Gen A/Z expect participatory, emotionally intelligent media ecosystems that extend into their lives. They don't consume content in a linear fashion anymore. The winning formula for creators and studios is content that feels lived-in, co-created and shared — not just watched. In an increasingly digital world, people are drawn to experiences that feel real, shared, and lasting

Social media reach is fantastic for us, and the future of distributing content, but that reach can feel rented — it's attention without ownership. To make fandom owned, you also need discovery in meaningful places and products that nurture relationships. Experiences, digital and physical. Metrics are a ride. Story, interactivity and product ecosystems are the journey

You mentioned that for the first time in the history of animation, an artist can actually make money by creating a walk cycle. I love that. Can you expand on that idea?
Buying physical art — people understand that. You hang it on a wall. But in animation, the work lives in motion — a walk cycle, a gesture, an expression. For the first time, with digital collectibles and blockchain tech, that kind of creative fragment can *itself* be owned, traded and rewarded. Many people misunderstand what an NFT is. It's really just the underlying technology that solves for authentication and a contract. But that doesn't matter, in the same way no-one cares how YouTube's protocol is able to stream videos en masse directly on the internet browser.

So now, with newer internet technology that allows for ownership: instead of animators being paid once for their labor, the work they create can actually hold value and continue to generate it. That's never been possible before — an artist can make money not just for a finished film, but for the creative DNA that builds it. A great example is Robbie Shilstone, an indie animator who has made waves in the art world selling his stunning animation clips for display, and co-creating with his patrons! (publique.world)

Tell us about your proudest moment been so far?
Where do I begin? We won over 40 industry awards for our animated content, we had major presence at Annecy, with over 1,000 people trending our event, we've held fandom events all over the world, sometimes reaching capacity at 1,500 people, and we have changed the lives of many artists that dared to believe.

Favorite animated movies/TV shows?
Surf's Up, *Ratatouille*, *Arcane*.

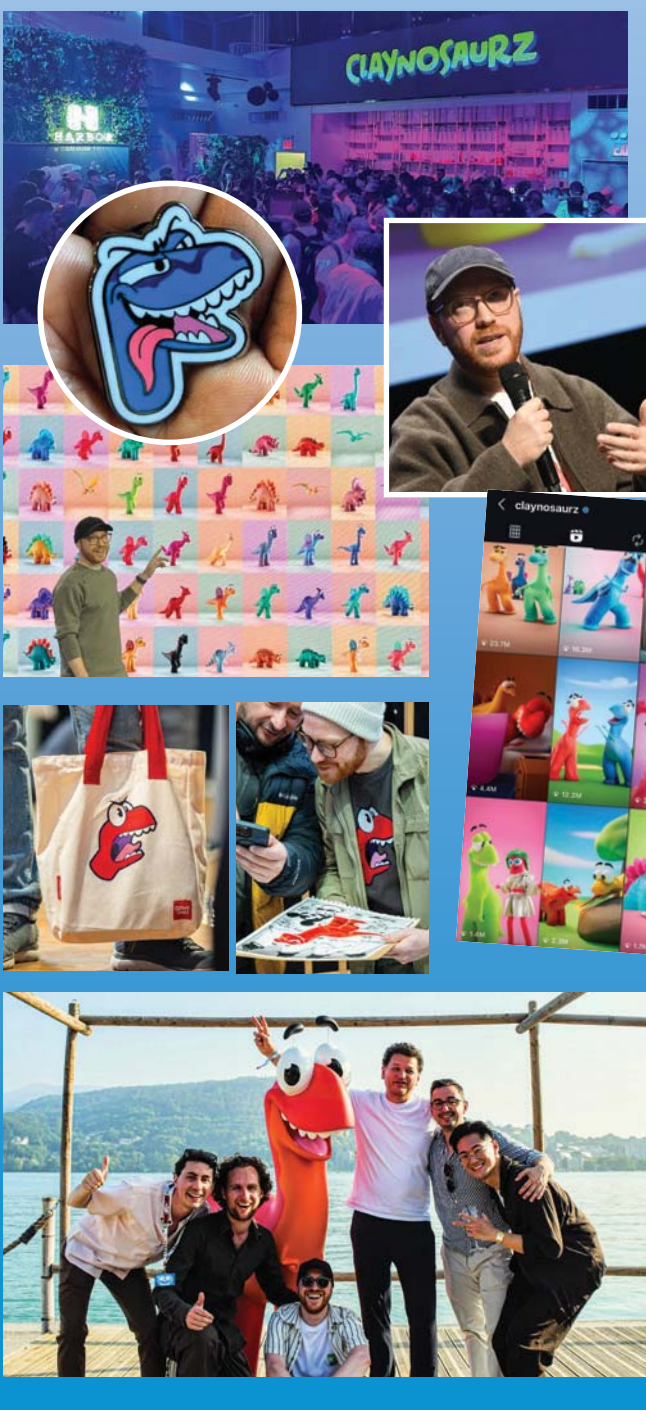
When was the first time you knew you wanted to work in animation?
I fell into it. Initially I wanted to direct, but really I got into movies because I was obsessed with *Jurassic Park* as a kid. That was magical. Eventually I got accepted into an animation program rather than a production program, and I was hooked once I started!

How do you see the future of animation changing in the next couple of years?
It's a scary time for many artists, with the advent of AI, and a market that is often predatory for creatives. I think that AI can be a super empowering tool, especially for creatives, but taste-making matters. Good taste. That has value when there's an oversaturation of slop. I think that the more bad stuff comes out, the more audiences want the quality content and seek the "rustic" human-made. ■

Find out more about Nic and his Jurassic friends at claynosaurz.com.

CLAYNOSAURZ' GLOBAL DOMINATION

Creative director and co-founder Nic Cabana has had a whirlwind period of activities worldwide, taking his popular dinos to animation events and markets such as Annecy, Comic-Con and MIPCOM over the past few months. The brand has big licensing and merchandising plans in place and rewards fans with lucrative social community activities and digital purchases. A new animated show based on the property — featuring the four friends Beex, Trixs, Milo and Flee — is also in the works, set to debut on YouTube.



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From the Mouths of Babes: Winner of the audience prize at Annecy, *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain* follows the adventures of an unusual Belgian child growing up in Japan.

A Handcrafted Vision of Childhood

How Maïlys Vallade and Liane-Cho Han Adapted *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain* with a signature graphic style rooted in close collaboration.

By Jennifer Wolfe

When *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain* premiered earlier this year in the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes, it was lauded for its bold graphic visual style and heartfelt story adapted from Amélie Nothomb's bestselling autobiographical novel. The 2D, digitally animated French-language film went on to win the Audience Award at Annecy, had its North American premiere at Toronto and will reach U.S. theaters via distributor GKIDS beginning Nov. 7.

In postwar Japan, where Western foreigners lived both inside and outside local traditions, Amélie (voiced by Loïse Charpentier) spends her early childhood in the care of her devoted nanny, Nishio-san (Victoria Grosbois). To her family, she is a distant and unknowable cipher, reflecting the Japanese belief that young children are more akin to gods than humans. That sense of mystery unravels on Amélie's third birthday, when a family event — and her very first taste of chocolate — alters her world and sets her on a path of discovery.

The 78-minute film is directed by Maïlys Vallade and Liane-Cho Han from a screenplay by Han and Vallade alongside French screenwriter Aude Py and art director and production designer Eddine Noël (*Long Way North*, *The Little Prince*). It was produced by Ikki Films and Maybe Movies, with producers Nidia Santiago, Edwina Liard, Claire La Combe and Henri Magalon, and executive producers Jean-Michel Spiner and Mireille Sarrazin.

All in the Family

For Vallade and Han, both Gobelins alumni and longtime collaborators, the project is the culmination of years of shared experience. Yet it is also a first — their debut feature, one that brings to life the fragility and wonder of childhood through a handcrafted graphic style created with their close-knit artistic "family."

Han was 19 when he discovered Nothomb's novel, *The Character of Rain*. "It left a strong impression on me, and I had always dreamed of adapting it one day," he recalls. Years later, while working with Vallade on Rémi Chayé's *Calamity, a Childhood of Martha Jane Cannary*, he gave her a copy of the book, planting a seed that would become their joint project.

Vallade thought the book's deeply personal perspective on childhood was aligned with the kind of storytelling she and Han were already pursuing. She had previously contributed to Mark Osborne's *The Little Prince* before joining Han on *Calamity*, and both felt that Nothomb's story invited a new level of creative challenge.

Most of the core creative team had already worked together on Chayé's visually groundbreaking films, developing a shared shorthand that carried into *Little Amélie*. Led by production designer and art director Noël, the visual development team included character designers Marietta Ren (*Calamity*, *Arcane*, *Lazarus*) and Marion Roussel (*Song of the Sea*, *Calamity*), whose early pencil and watercolor sketches helped define the film's handmade sensibility. Around them, the circle expanded: *Calamity* alum Juliette Laurent oversaw animation, Roussel directed layouts alongside Hanne Galvez (*The Summit of the Gods*), and concept artists Justine Thibault and Simon Dumonceau — both *Calamity* veterans — anchored the background department.

Over the course of earlier projects, the two directors had built such strong bonds with these artists that decisions often required no explanation. "We had already worked together with Eddine, Marietta and Marion," Vallade recounts. "Everyone knew the style, the universe. We didn't have to explain." Han adds, "It's like a conversation between old friends. That's why we could move quickly."

"Everyone knew the style, the universe. We didn't have to explain. It's like a conversation between old friends. That's why we could move quickly."

DIRECTOR MAÏLYS VALLADE

Building a Visual Language

The film's handcrafted visual style became its unifying language as Vallade and Han built on the graphic techniques they had first explored with *Calamity*. Under the guidance of Noël, who carried out early research on the palette and visual direction, the team embraced rounder shapes, pastel tones and layered transparencies to suggest proximity and distance. Flat shapes delicately layered with digital touches give the visuals a gouache-like texture.

"We like this way of working without outlines, so as to not to close the character in," says Vallade, describing how this technique allows characters to blend harmoniously with the backgrounds and lighting.

Their influences were wide-ranging but also deeply personal. Working within Chayé's studio, Maybe Movies, they carried forward lessons from *Long Way North* and *Calamity*, while Chayé himself contributed layout work that added painterly elegance to the final visuals.

The directors also looked outward, drawing inspiration from the painterly textures of Tonko House's Oscar-nominated animated short *The Dam Keeper*. Other references included Studio Ghibli's Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata for their atmospheric treatment of childhood and the stark horrors of war, as well as Japanese landscape artists such as Kawase Hasui, the plein-air paintings of Henri Rivière and Jacques Majorelle's luminous travel sketches, captured on film in *Morocco in the Eyes of Majorelle*.

"But our biggest inspiration is reality," says Han, underscoring the filmmakers' commitment to portraying childhood with honesty.

That sensibility carried into the film's backgrounds, which were rooted in plein-air studies of autumn leaves, gray winter skies and the first blossoms of spring. Characters, meanwhile, were designed with signature colors that made them instantly recognizable while blending seamlessly into their environments. Together, these choices gave the seasonal shifts and visual world a narrative weight that mirrors Amélie's own inner journey.

Production & Workflow

In European feature animation, where productions often stretch three or four years, *Little Amélie* stands out for its breathtaking pace. From production start to delivery, the team finished in just 14 months. "Fourteen months is crazy for a feature," Han admits. "But because of the preparation, it was possible."

By the time production began, the visual language was locked, the character designs settled and the workflow defined. "We had already done the research, the style was locked. That's why we could move so fast," Vallade explains.

While the handcrafted graphic style established the film's identity, its realization required a pipeline that was both nimble and decentralized. Vallade and Han designed the workflow around a combination of Adobe Animate and Photoshop. A 3D model of the family house was also built to plan complex point-of-view shots, allowing the directors to map camera movement and perspective before handing sequences to layout and animation teams.

Though centered in France, the pipeline extended well beyond. Backgrounds, layout and effects were handled in Paris; audio post in Rennes; and compositing on Réunion Island. Visual effects artist Olivier Malric (*Kung Fu Panda*) contributed from Sydney, adding atmospheric details. Vallade and Han themselves worked between Lyon and Denmark, managing the flow of material across time zones. Storyboarding, too, was decentralized, with artists contributing sequences remotely.

Finding Amélie's Voice

The handcrafted ethos of *Little Amélie* extended past the visuals into its soundscape. Composer Mari Fukuhara crafted a score that wove together Japanese and European influences, mirroring the novel's roots in Nothomb's childhood in Japan and its adaptation through a French creative lens.

The voice cast was assembled with the same care. Grosbois gives warmth to Nishio-san, the caretaker at the

"The book has a lot of philosophical, very deep, difficult words that kids could probably not understand, but we really believe that kids understand more than we think."

DIRECTOR LIANE-CHO HAN

center of Amélie's world, while Laetitia Coryn and Marc Arnaud portray her parents, and Cathy Cerdà voices her grandmother. Japanese actors such as Yumi Fujimori brought authenticity to supporting roles, with Haylee Issembourg, Isaac Schoumsky, François Raison and Emmylou Homs rounding out the ensemble.

Yet the greatest challenge lay in capturing Amélie herself. The directors needed both a child's immediacy and a narrator's voice that carried the weight of hindsight. "The voice coming from the future already knows what will happen, while Amélie's own lines are anchored in the present," Han explains.

They chose Charpentier (*Sirocco and the Kingdom of the Winds*), who was just eight when production began, but as her voice matured the team enlisted additional voices. "We realized we had to layer different voices to keep Amélie believable," Vallade recalls. This also meant postponing most of the recording until late in production, with animators avoiding lip-sync so the dialog could be integrated at the very end.

Taking Childhood Seriously

Behind these choices was a deeper commitment that shaped every stage of the adaptation. For both filmmakers, the novel's perspective on childhood was key. "We started with the idea of doing something for an adult audience," says Vallade. "And quickly, we realized — along with our producers — that it would be good to also target a kids' audience."

Han adds that what drew him to the book in the first place was the gravity it placed on a child's inner world. "It takes childhood very seriously," he explains, noting that the directors wanted to reflect that same honesty on screen. For Vallade, this meant resisting simplification: "We realized we had to make a film that could speak to children but without underestimating them."

Shaping an adult novel into a film that could resonate with children was no small task. "The book has a lot of philosophical, very deep, difficult words that kids could probably not understand," Han acknowledges. "But we really believe that kids understand more than we think." ■

GKIDS will release *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain* nationwide on Nov. 7.

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HOW TO PAINT AN EPIC REVENGE TABLEAU

Japanese auteur Mamoru Hosoda discusses the possibilities of CG animation and his new feature *Scarlet* in an exclusive interview.

By Blake Simon

Cor not CG? That is the question that anime veteran Mamoru Hosoda has been pondering with his film *Scarlet* — a reimagining of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that fuses traditional hand-drawn animation with 3D CG. *Animation Magazine* had the pleasure of sitting down with Hosoda after *Scarlet*'s premiere in Venice. It was exciting to pick the director's brain before critics could shape the conversation around his new film, which is bursting with atypical ideas and daring gambits.

Over the past two decades, Hosoda has become renowned for crafting what he calls "fantasy films grounded in everyday life" — celebrated works such as *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (2006), *Summer Wars* (2009) and *Belle* (2021). This time, however, he wanted revenge. "I wanted to make something intense," explains Hosoda. "That's why I decided to pursue a revenge story. It's a popular genre because everyone can relate to that desire in some respect — it allows them to vent their frustrations."

The anime veteran says he identified Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as the genre's urtext and worked from there.

"I came to realize that *Hamlet* is more than a revenge story," says Hosoda. "It's about a young person struggling to learn how to live. Revenge can be a trigger for someone to reflect upon the way they live their life and how they can make things better. I think young people today have that same struggle in their everyday lives. Despite the fact that Scarlet is a princess — someone distant from our reality — I think the film encapsulates and empathizes with those feelings."

"Just because I use CGI animation [now], it doesn't mean that I have abandoned traditional forms. I believe we should keep developing both of them by merging them and exploring new expressions, rather than choosing one."
DIRECTOR MAMORU HOSODA

Painting in Browns and Reds

The opening moments of *Scarlet* are startling. The film cuts from black to an intricately detailed landscape that overwhelms the eyes — a photorealistic ocean in the sky overlooking hilly, barren dunes that are cast in earthy browns and reds. Our heroine is under siege, wrestling with bodies that wound her to the point of spilling realistic blood. This is less a family fantasy film and more a scene reminiscent of seinen manga classic *Berserk*. "I think everyone will be surprised at first," says Hosoda. "The sound is very loud too — it might make some people scared. But it represents the beginning of Scarlet's challenging journey. I wanted to depict how she changes and grows through that journey, and how the perspectives of her and [co-lead] Hijiri change. I gave a lot of thought as to how we should introduce this world."

The world in question is a purgatory of sorts — a vast expanse that Scarlet finds herself cursed to wander after her premature demise. "I wanted to make these landscapes appear empty, but on closer inspection, rich and colorful," explains Hosoda. "The characters have to endure a hard journey, but it gradually begins to look more beautiful. It relates to the landscape of our own lives — I wanted to directly express our emotional landscapes in the frame."

As with Hosoda's previous films, the "otherworld" is a prism through which to explore our own grounded realities. "Throughout the history of art, there have been so many depictions of the afterlife," reflects Hosoda. "During production, I asked an art historian why so many artists have been drawn to this otherworld. The answer I received is that they haven't been depicting a world beyond our own at all; they're actually exploring the world in which we live. I concur with that idea. I feel that there is always a connection between the art we make and the lives we live. Even if things are tough, they can be beautiful at the same time, so even when these landscapes are almost void-like, I wanted to use a lot of color."

Characters retain the same fundamental stylistic trappings in this otherworld, but they are instead rendered as three-dimensional CGI models. "To differentiate between the worlds, I used different techniques. In my previous film, *Belle*, we hand-drew the scenes that took place in an everyday 'real' world and used CG for the scenes in the virtual internet world — because it was the world inside the computer. This time, I developed that further and differentiated the living world and the otherworld using different techniques. 3D CG can

Photo: Takeshi Shinto

enhance — for example, when Scarlet is tired or covered in dirt. These are elements that are perhaps too flat to see or not fully expressed by hand-drawing.

"For me, the difference between hand-drawn animation and CG animation is just a difference in art materials," Hosoda points out. "Some hand-drawn animation fans do not like CG animation, but I believe that it's just a matter of how you use it. Rather than doing it in an American way like Pixar or Disney do, I've been exploring a way to respect the tradition of Japanese hand-drawn art when I use CG. We wanted to make a CG animation that utilizes the beauty of hand-drawn animation."

The results are fascinating. The film shifts between 2D and 3D action from shot to shot, the effect equal parts beguilingly immersive and disorientingly disjointed. With the film fresh and reviews not yet released, it's hard not to ask Hosoda if he intends to continue exploring this stylistic fusion if the critics deem *Scarlet* a misfire. He pauses for a moment faced with the question, his expression turning serious — but brightens and gains confidence as he speaks.

"There will always be dissenting opinions when someone challenges the status quo in the pursuit of something new," he says. "I see myself as someone looking for new challenges rather than upholding tradition. How can we create a new animation style — a new film style? Rather than repeating what we've already achieved, I want to take on new challenges with my new films, to find the essence of a cinema that has never been discovered before. It's not just a matter of style. I believe we also need to find stories, characters and things that have never been depicted in cinema before, to match these new styles.

"I always try to challenge myself to make something fresh. It's not an easy path, and admittedly, I was dubious throughout production — I didn't truly know if these decisions were the 'right' or 'best' choices. But I don't think that we can further the medium by simply respecting traditional hand-drawing, because I think that — back then — even those artists that had arrived at what we now call a 'traditional style' by trying, exploiting and exploring new techniques."

Making Giant Leaps

Hosada points out that that the two styles don't have to be mutually exclusive. "[Historically], you have a traditional hand-drawn animation style and a traditional CG animation style," he notes. "But that should not be the end, and everyone is exploring new styles in animation. The recent *Spider-Verse* films and *Arcane* are examples of this — I think everyone in the world wants to make an animation with a style never used before. I tried to find a new style that equally respects the tradition of Japanese animation. But it was very difficult, because you don't know the answer to that — in fact, I still haven't figured it out. What is correct? What constitutes 'a new style'? And is everyone going to accept it? The process of figuring this out was challenging, but we made an attempt, believing that this would make a step forward."

Hosoda's works — and his characters — have been defined by these initial steps that escalate into great leaps forward. Through all of them, the director's core philosophy has remained consistent. "Nineteen years ago, when I made *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, an American journalist asked me why I made a fully hand-drawn animation film in the heyday of CG animation," he reflects. "He asked me if it had felt old-fashioned and had made me want to try new technology. I said to him, 'Those are just different techniques. 3D and CGI are beautiful, but a single line drawn by a wonderful animator is also beautiful.' And I believe that hasn't changed at all. Just because I use 3D CGI animation [now], it doesn't mean that I have abandoned traditional forms. I believe we should keep developing both of them by merging them and exploring new expressions, rather than choosing one — I believe that is the way a creator should be. Therefore, I will keep working with both hand-drawn animation and CG animation. It doesn't make a difference whether you use a pencil, a pen or oil paint. The important thing is what is depicted there and how we depict it." ■

Cruel to be Kind: A young exiled princess (voiced by Mana Ashida) plots to avenge the murder of her father in *Scarlet*, Mamoru Hosoda's eagerly anticipated take on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

With thanks to Sayaka Yamaguchi and Yuki Fujiwara for translating.

Sony will release *Scarlet* in U.S. theaters on Feb. 6.

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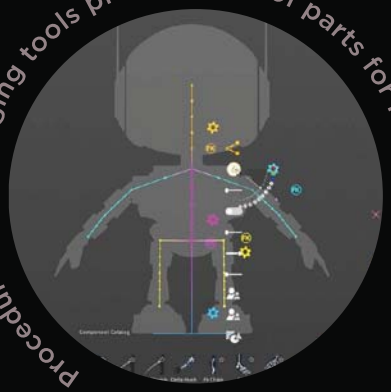

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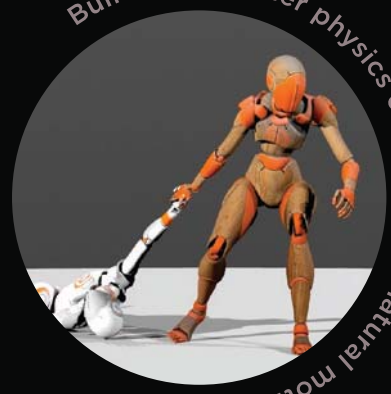

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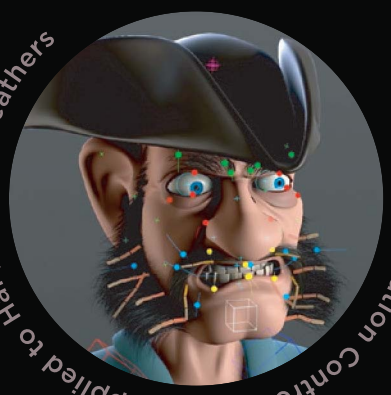

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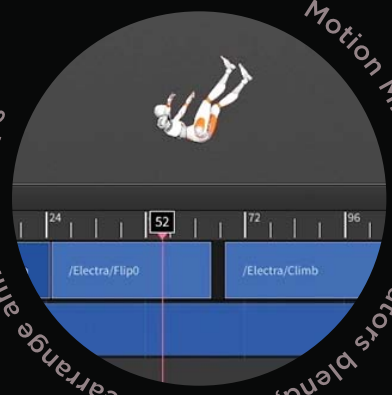


Motion Mixer lets animators blend, layer and rearrange animation clips

SideFX.com

ANIMALS IN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Celebrated Spanish helmer Alberto Vázquez raises the curtain on his imaginative new feature *Decorado*.

By Ramin Zahed

Fans of popular Spanish comics artist-turned-animation director Alberto Vázquez know to expect brilliant allegories of modern society disguised as cute animal fables. The artist's third feature project, *Decorado* (following *Birdboy: The Forgotten Children* and *Unicorn Wars*), which is based on his Goya Award-winning 2016 short of the same name, continues that tradition. The inventive 2D-animated movie centers on a middle-aged mouse who begins to suspect that his whole world is a setup — a fake "scenery" run by the powerful, faceless corporation known as ALMA (Almighty Limitless Megacorporative Agency). Call it Mickey Mouse meets *The Truman Show* in Fleischer town.

The La Coruña, Galicia-based director was generous enough to answer a few of our questions via email, just as his movie was about to premiere in his home country of Spain last month:

***Decorado* began its journey as a beautiful short film. Why did you decide to expand it into a feature film and in color?**
It all started with some short comic stories I did about 15 years ago. Then, in 2016, just after finishing the film *Psiconautas*, I wrote and directed the 10-minute short film *Decorado*, in which I revisited some of those stories and used graphics inspired by 19th century engravings in the style of Gustave Doré.

Years later, I met a screenwriter named Xavi Manuel, and together we started writing an animated series for adults based on the short film. This series project didn't go ahead, but we liked many of the ideas and decided to write a feature film script.

It has been a long process to get to this film, full of coincidences and people who have made it possible. There was no predetermined plan to make this film when the short film was made.

When did you start working on the film, and how long did it take you to finish it?

Well, we started working on the screenplay in 2021/2022 and finished it in September 2025. Four years seems like a long time, but my previous films took about six years.

Where was the animation produced and what tools were used to create its special look?

Decorado is a Spanish-Portuguese co-production by the studios Abano, Uniko, Glow and Sardinha em Lata. In Europe, films are financed with money from different regions, and this film was made in La Coruña (where I live), Bilbao, Almendralejo and Portugal.

The entire film [was] animated and lit in Blender (as was *Unicorn Wars*), and the backgrounds [were] done in Photoshop.

What would you say was the most difficult part of making this film?

There are many difficult parts because making an animated film is difficult in general. In addition to being an artist and having sensitivity, you need to have a lot of technical knowledge and a lot of emotional resilience. It takes many years of work, and there are many small problems all the time.

When you work on such long projects, you tend to lose perspective and go through many phases: You love the film, then you don't like it anymore, then you're tired, you think there are things that don't make sense, you think it might have bad pacing. Well, in the end, you have to love it with its good and not-so-good aspects. It is your son.

"The current global situation is very disturbing: wars, hyperconnectivity, polarization, artificial intelligence, megalomaniac leaders, mega-corporations that control everything. I think *Decorado* is a contemporary fable about this world, but I think reality is even worse than what the movie depicts."

DIRECTOR ALBERTO VÁZQUEZ

Can you describe the film's special visual style?

I've always been the art director on all my films, but on this film, I wanted to evolve my style a little. To do this, we brought in José Luis Agreda as art director. I already knew him from the world of comics and, as we are both artists, we got on very well both personally and professionally.

He had already worked as art director on films such as *Buñuel in the Labyrinth of the Turtles* and *Robot Dreams,* and he is someone who, in addition to having his own style, knows how to adapt perfectly to what the film needs.

At the beginning, we talked a lot about the possible visual identity of the film. We knew we wanted to keep the look of the characters similar to that of the short film and *Unicorn Wars*, but also to evolve the style. And José brought his own personality to the table. One of the most important aspects was the use of color. In this film, we wanted the colors to be symbolic and narrative, not naturalistic. Color must serve the story; it must support the emotions and themes. Working with José was a pleasure. He is very intelligent, a great artist, and the collaboration was very positive.

The animation direction was done by Pamela Poltronieri, an animator I have been working with for over 12 years. Pamela is a great professional and has taken great care with the characters' performances. Even though they are animals, their gestures, looks and expressions are very human.

Have you always been influenced by the early animated shorts by Fleischer and Disney? What do you like about that style of animation?

The world of classic animation is what I saw on television as a child. It's a world that gives me peace of mind, a kind of comfort zone. I really like the world of animals: They remind me of the beginnings of animation, comics and fables. Animals belong to all cultures. They have no defined time or place; they are universal.

I like working with all [those] classic, childlike aesthetics to deal with contemporary issues. I think that fantasy allows you to approach current issues in an original way. I was interested in talking about certain current crises: economic, employment, existential, relationship crises,

Of Mice and Men: Alberto Vázquez's third feature film, *Decorado,* centers on the surreal adventures of a mouse named Arnold who realizes that his whole world is a sham, orchestrated by a powerful megacorporation.

as well as the superficial relationships of today's world.

When did you first realize that you wanted to work in animation?

When I discovered the world of animated short films. After making my first short film, I was able to travel to many short film festivals around the world and fell in love with the artistic and narrative possibilities of this medium, which is so free and offers so many techniques.

I also came from a background in comics and illustration, but I always loved cinema. Animation is right between the two worlds: comics and cinema. So my adaptation was good, even though I never studied comics or cinema, but I was able to learn a lot from all the people I've worked with.

Who are your biggest animation influences?

Mary Blair, *The Simpsons*, Eyvind Earle, David OReilly, Miyazaki, Takahata, Michaël Dudok de Wit, J.J. Villard, Yuri Norstein, Jan Švankmajer, Genndy Tartakovsky, Réka Bucsi, Roland Topor, Vernon Chatman and others.

What is your take on the state of feature animation worldwide?

I think animation is a very powerful medium, although most of the films made are aimed at children or family audiences. I think that's fine, but I miss more adult or auteur-style offerings, as is the case in live-action cinema. We'll see how the sector evolves with the development of AI. It's clear that it's going to be a huge paradigm shift.

What do you hope audiences will take away from your new movie?

I would like the film to be remembered for some time after they have seen it. I mean that the viewer should remember a moment or scene that made them laugh, enjoy themselves, feel depressed or terrified. I would be satisfied with that.

Our world has become even more strange and surreal since your last film. Do you feel there is any hope for humanity? Maybe animation and comics are our only salvation?

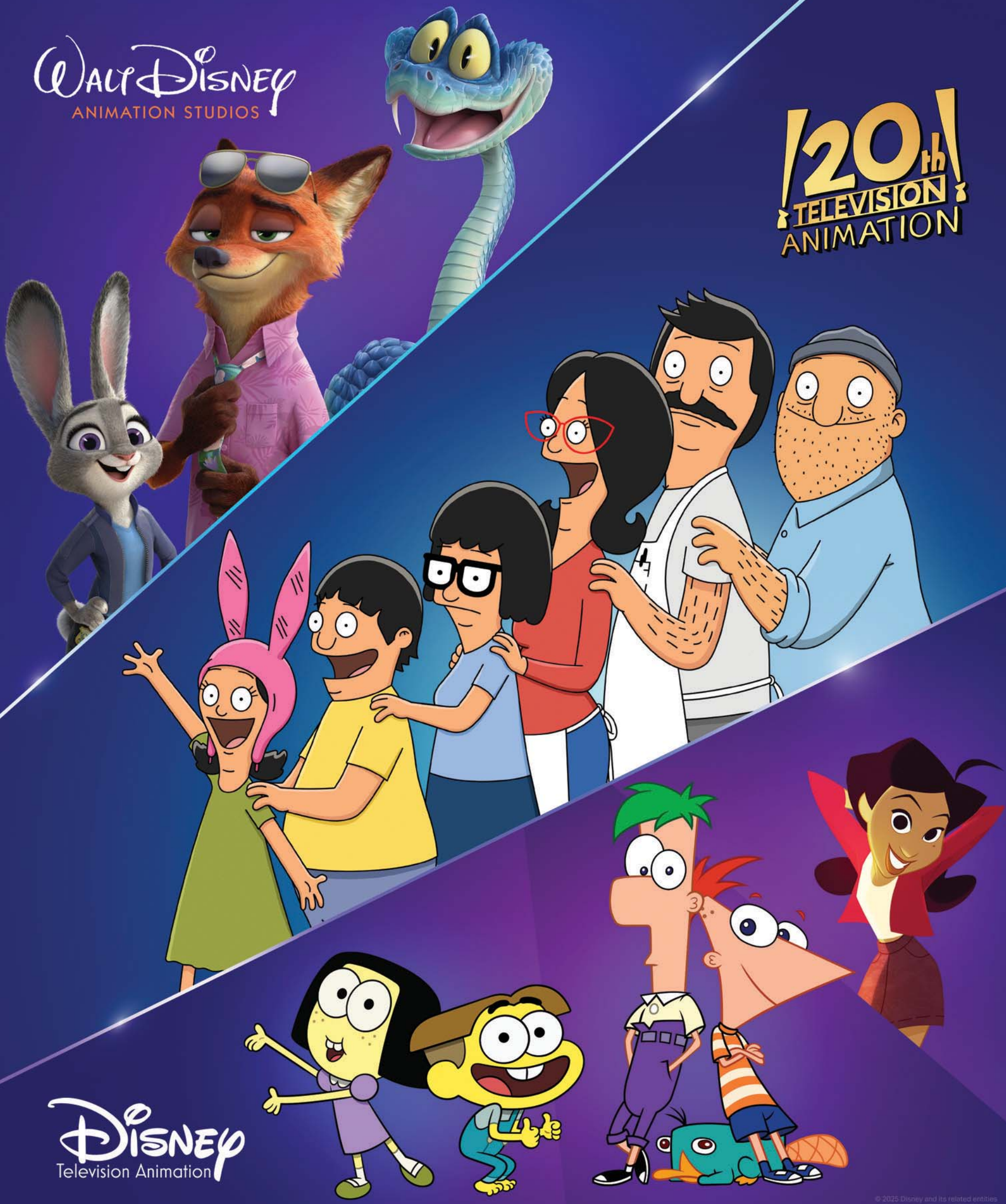
The current global situation is very disturbing: wars, hyperconnectivity, polarization, artificial intelligence, megalomaniac leaders, mega-corporations that control everything. I think *Decorado* is a contemporary fable about this world, but I think reality is even worse than what the movie depicts.

Perhaps animation, comics, art, music and true friendship can help us a lot to cope with the current situation. At least they help me! ■

***Decorado* premiered Oct. 24 in Spain. The film also had its L.A. premiere as part of the Animation Is Film Festival last month.**

Walt Disney Animation Studios

20th Television Animation



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Continues on next page

A Pawsome New Superhero Takes Flight!

A loveable golden retriever saves the day in ICON's upcoming animated feature, *Charlie the Wonderdog*.

A new kind of hero is about to take the world by storm. Opening worldwide on January 16, 2026, *Charlie the Wonderdog* promises to deliver a joyful and heartfelt cinematic experience — a sweeping CG-animated adventure that celebrates courage, friendship, and the unbreakable bond between a boy and his dog.

The film follows Charlie, a lovable golden retriever whose ordinary life takes an extraordinary turn, setting him on a journey that will test his heart, his strength, and his loyalty. As Charlie discovers newfound abilities that defy imagination, he soon realizes the true power of heroism lies not in what he can do — but in who he is.

Superstar Owen Wilson lends his trademark warmth and humor to the role, infusing Charlie with the charm, wit, and sincerity that have made Owen one of Hollywood's most beloved stars. Directed by Shea Wageman, *Charlie the Wonderdog* combines dazzling animation, laugh-out-loud comedy, and cinematic storytelling on a global scale. "We wanted to make a movie that feels epic but emotionally real," says Wageman. "It's a story about love, bravery, and the kind of friendship that changes your life forever."

A Superhero Movie with Soul

Adding to the film's emotional resonance is an all-new collection of original music by Bryan Adams, whose soaring anthems and heartfelt ballads amplify the film's humor, adventure and heart. Adams' music gives, *Charlie the Wonderdog,* timeless energy — an emotional rhythm that brings every moment to life.

Charlie the Wonderdog delivers a visual feast of color, scale and imagination. Its tone — equal parts adventurous and deeply human — captures the spirit of a modern family classic, one that will have audiences laughing, cheering, and tearing up in equal measure.

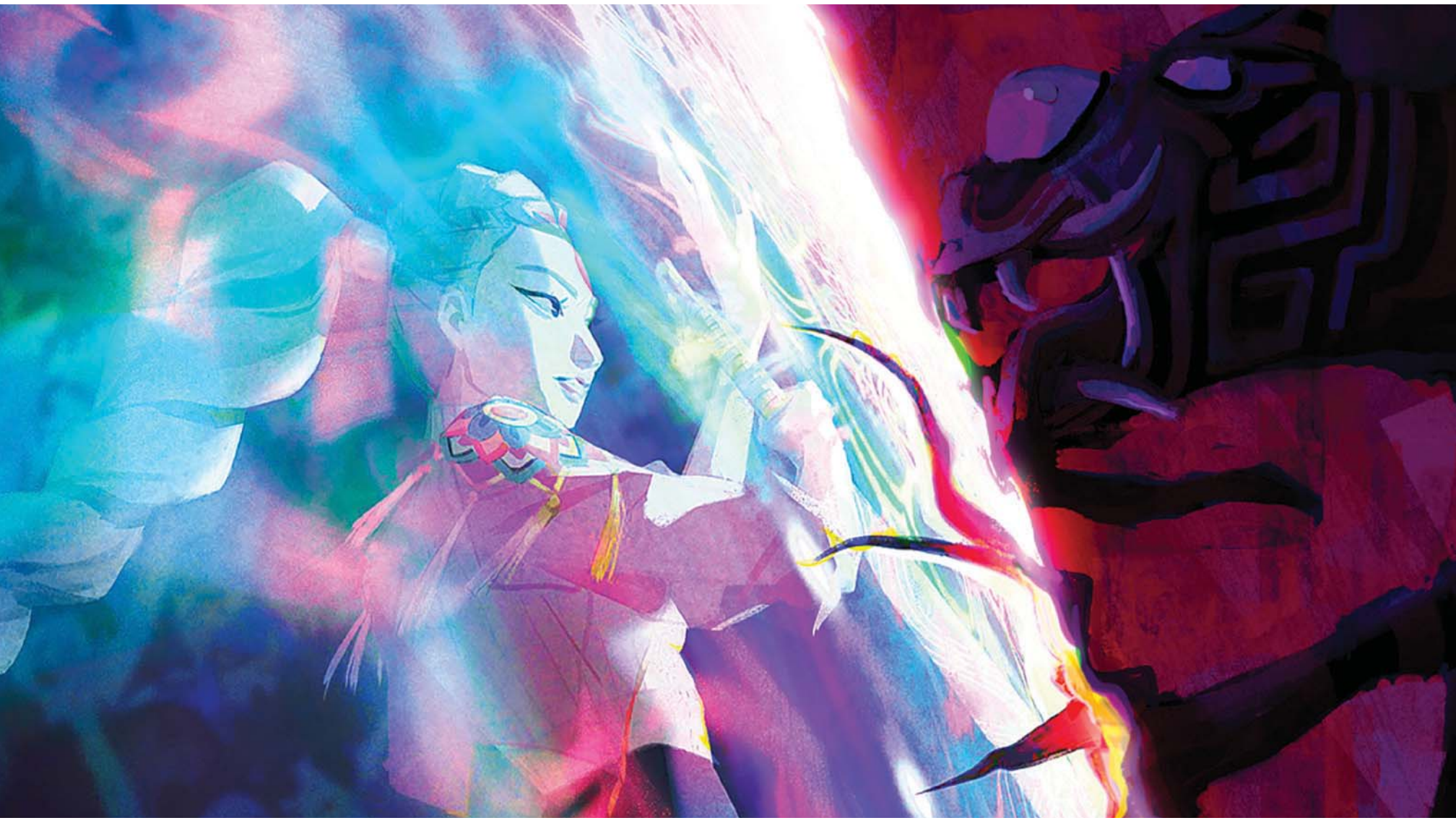
Set for a global theatrical rollout across more than 30 territories, *Charlie the Wonderdog* has already generated global buzz. Early screenings have praised its emotional depth and striking visuals, calling it "a superhero movie with soul."

With universal themes, high-flying adventure, and a lovable lead destined to join the pantheon of animated icons, *Charlie the Wonderdog* is poised to be the first breakout animated hit of 2026 — reminding audiences everywhere that heroes come in all forms. ■

ICON Creative Studio's *Charlie the Wonderdog* opens worldwide on Jan. 16, 2026. For more information, visit iconcreativestudio.com.

ANGELS & DEMONS REVISITED

Kpop Demon Hunters directors Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans look back at some of their iconic film's special visdev art.



Helen Chen, Production Designer

Since premiering on Netflix in June, Sony Picture Animation's *KPop Demon Hunters* has become a record-breaking cultural phenomenon. Not only did the movie become Netflix's most-watched title of all time, its soundtrack placed four songs on Billboard top 10, and its lead single "Golden" by HUNTR/X spent eight weeks at No. 1. The sing-along version of the movie was also a huge hit and grossed $18 million in one week. We interviewed the film's brilliant directors Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans in our June issue (No. 350). For our special Oscar kick-off issue, the duo was kind enough to provide some special insights into some of their favorite visdev art:

Maggie Kang

Chris Appelhans

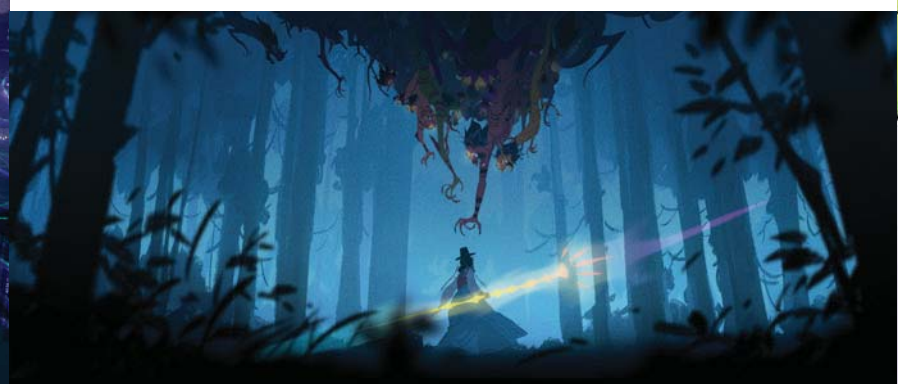
"This color-key image goes back to the sequence right before the final sequence," says Maggie Kang. "We had this great idea to make the demon king, Gwi-Ma, just a giant mouth because it felt like the whole point of this character was that he was the voice of horrible thoughts in your head. He is most interesting when he manifested that way rather than as some big monster," adds Appelhans.

"We explored having a monster body for him, and every time we did that, it just made him less scary, minimized and less elemental," Kang explains. "We found some beautiful editorial photography that used these raspberry red gel atmospheres, and that was really inspiring for making his world and flame stylish. There's a painting that [art director] Scott Watanabe did of Gwi-Ma in this beautiful red world, and that was the stylish demon world we wanted to see." She adds, "We wanted it to be stylish, but also the kind of a place where if you stay there for too long, you'll go mad. It wasn't comfortable, but we still wanted it to be beautiful."

Nacho Molina, Visual Development Artist

Wendell Dalit, Art Director

"This is one of my favorites," says Appelhans. "Helen Chan and [production designer' David Bleich worked on this one. The Honmoon was such a trippy idea — this metaphysical barrier that had patterns, and it was sonic but also light. It was just a testament to how talented the artists are that could make it look so stylish." "We talk about these very strange concepts, and these amazing artists were able to take these ideas and wrap it all up in one image that tells so much story!" concludes Kang.

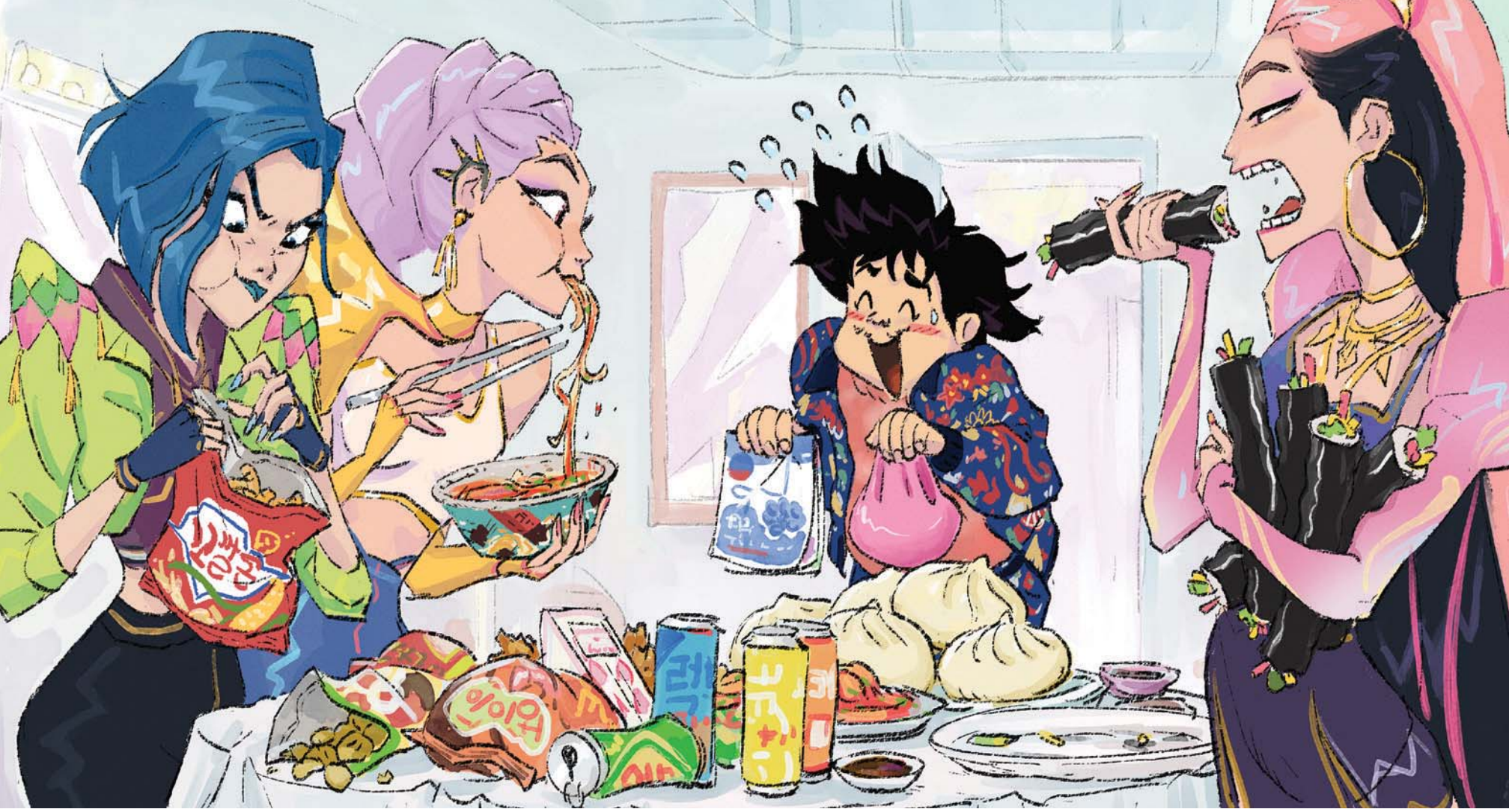


Helen Chen, Production Designer

"One of our inspirations for the city and its atmosphere design was the *Sailor Moon* backgrounds," says Appelhans. "They did a really, really good job of being atmospheric and lost and found. They're airbrush-y in a very elegant way, but they feel modern too. We didn't want it to look like a live-action frame, so we used color to create this heightened, romanticized version of Seoul."

"That's a really early beautiful concept art that [production designer] Helen Mingjue Chan created," explains Kang. "She was just exploring visual ideas for ancient hunters as well as these sonic weapons that are magical and have been formed from the Honmoon itself. She was exploring different ways the demons could enter the world. These traditional women were such cool superheroes, because that's what we were doing, establishing new superhero lore." Applehans elaborates, "Helen and [art director] Ami Thompson did a lot of paintings early on with these traditional costumes and various supernatural ideas all mashed together. They make it look so easy, but it could also look very goofy. They are very skillfully visualized."

Ami Thomspon, Character Designer

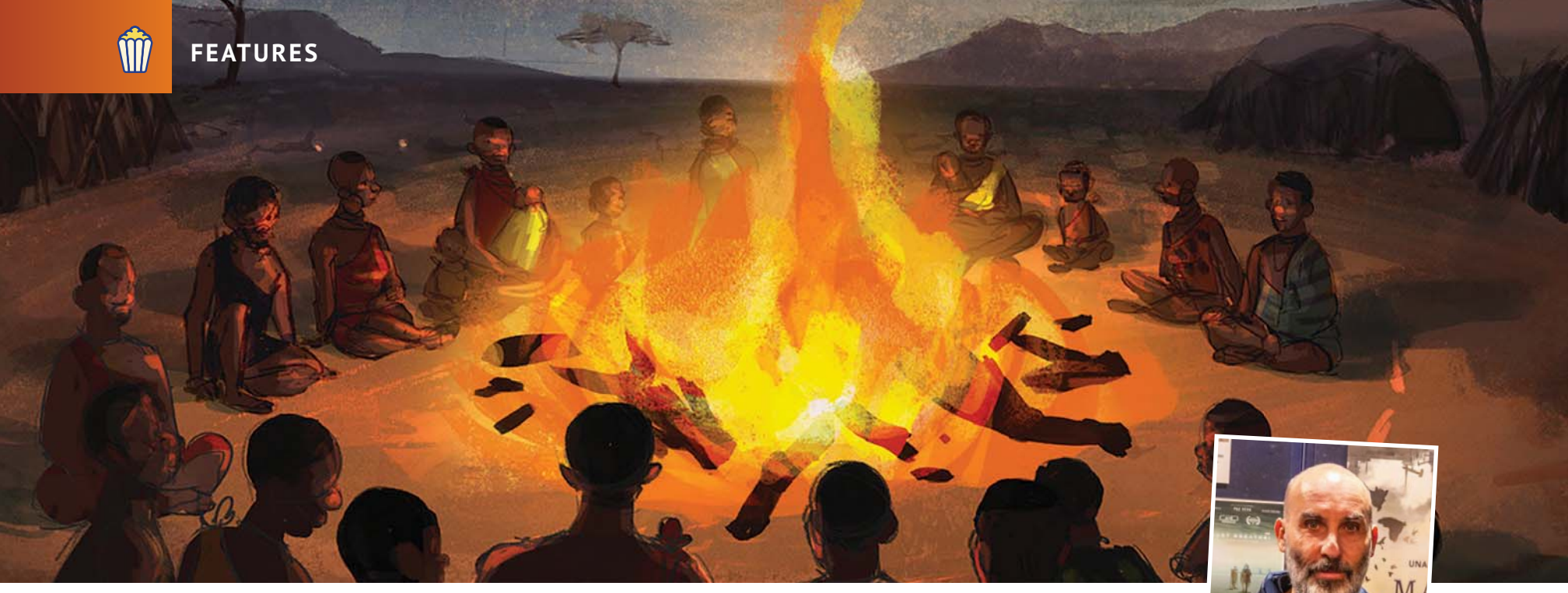


Scott Watanabe, Art Director

"We loved showing these girls who love to truly chow down in a way that wasn't ladylike and proper," says Chris Appelhans. "The artist did this great image of all these different faces and reactions to food — almost like Homer Simpson profile shots of chowing down on a kimbap. All of that was part of Maggie's original vision of just having these girls be much more real than what we're used to seeing on screen."

"This is another Scott Watanabe painting," notes Kang. "It depicts the final form of the girls once they come together in the finale. It's actually a sister image of the three ancient demon hunters and it mirrors the power of this trio as they are united as a team, and they're also trailing the energy of the Honmoon. They're at the peak of their power as they've shed all their shame and emerged more powerful than before because of that."

Scott Watanabe, Art Director



David Baute

Flights for Survival

David Baute's powerful animated documentary, *Black Butterflies*, chronicles three eye-opening and personal tales about climate refugees.

The Annecy Festival Contrechamp prize-nominated feature *Black Butterflies* (*Mariposas Negras*) spotlights the plight of climate refugees from different regions of the world who have to flee their homelands to find shelter from various weather-related catastrophes. The animated feature is directed by talented Catalan documentarian David Baute, who has spent years traveling and collecting climate-related stories.

The film centers on Tanit, Valeria and Sheila — three women displaced from their rural lives who have to find their way amidst cramped urban sprawls. Navigating a labyrinth of government bureaucracy, abuse and furthered poverty, they will be stripped of their dignity, community and identities as they fight for survival.

"I like to work on thematic documentaries that deal with social and environmental issues," Baute tells *Animation Magzine*. "I began to investigate climate issues over 20 years ago, not only from the perspective of climate data, but also its consequences in human beings. I focused on the migratory flows it produced, which were more limited at the time but now affect millions of people. This led me to Saint Martin in the Caribbean, Ghoromara in India and Turkana in Africa. I started shooting hundreds of hours, documenting everything, following women across the globe forced to leave their homelands when natural forces render them uninhabitable. We visited the same places every two or three years, and we shot as much footage as we could, which later served as inspiration for the film, both visually and for its sound design."

"I hope audiences will be entertained and moved by this film. Animation is the best way to capture the essence of true stories. We're all surrounded by all kinds of 'black butterflies,' but we must be able to acknowledge them. We live in a precious world, and we have to care for it."

PRODUCER EDMON ROCH

An Immersive Experience

The film's producer Edmon Roch (*Tad the Explorer* movies, *Jokes & Cigarettes, Garbo: The Spy*) believes that the line between fiction and non-fiction is becoming thinner these days. "It's wonderful to have been selected not only by the most renowned animation film festivals in the world, but also by the most important documentary festivals as well," he notes. "*Black Butterflies* is an animated documentary for a global audience. We have been awarded as Best Animated Feature Film by the Spanish Film Academy (Goya Award), Catalan Film Academy (Gaudí Award), Spanish Film Producers (Forqué Award), and the prestigious Ibero-American awards Platino and Quirino, prior to releasing the film in the U.S."

Baute says he was fortunate to have a most talented team attached to the project. "Pepe Sánchez (*Run Ozzy Run*), who started with me to design the entire production, acted as the animation director as well," he notes. "María Pulido was the director of photography and art director. Twelve-time Grammy Award winner Panamanian musician Rubén Blades composed our original song, 'Inmigrantes,' and Diego Navarro created a beautiful score, weaving the three stories together through the unique sounds of each place. In addition, Oriol Tarragó (*Jurassic World, The Impossible*) and Sara Romero did an exquisite job on the film's sound design. On top of it all, Yaiza Berrocal, who worked closely with me, wrote a precious screenplay."

The director also believes that films belong to their audiences, but he also thinks that *Black Butterflies* also belongs to the women portrayed and their communities. "Tanit, Valeria and Sheila have powerful, true stories," he adds. "Animation is the best possible way not only to depict them, but to make them reach wide audiences all over the world".

"When David told me the stories of these women, I knew this was the animated feature film I had to produce," says Roch. "Besides the different awards we've won, to me the most precious one was UNHCR director Sivanka Dhanapala welcoming us to their headquarters in New York and thanking us for the film. I like movies that not only entertain but make us grow as conscious human beings."

Just like that other award-winning European *Flow, Black Butterfly*'s eye-popping animation is produced in Blender and Grease Pencil. The film's visuals were praised by several publications. As *Variety* pointed out, its "delicate 2D animation is informed by art from regions the film depicts — the Caribbean, India and the Turkana County. Rich textures and dreamy watercolors draw the viewer into the scene as the score ranges from ambient and ethereal, to ancestral, to employing acoustic hand-strung guitar chords." Surprisingly, the estimated budget for the project was under $3 million.

When asked about his desired impact of the movie, Baute responds, "As a filmmaker, I am inspired by true stories. On the environmental and climate issue, we hear such disparate testimonies every day from experts, politicians, citizens, that it's already beginning to generate a certain fatigue in the population, and this is dangerous. For this reason, we've tried to put a face to this drama, which is also the leading cause of migration in the world, and help generate a deeper debate."

"I hope audiences will be entertained and moved by this film," adds Roch. "Animation is the best way to capture the essence of true stories. We're all surrounded by all kinds of 'black butterflies,' but we must be able to acknowledge them. We live in a precious world, and we have to care for it." ■

***Black Butterflies* is a Spanish-Panamanian co-production between Edmon Roch's Ikiru Films David Baute's Tinglado Film, Cesar Zelada's Tunche Films, Marc Sabé's Anangu Grup and Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals. Pink Parrot Media holds the film's global rights. It will be released in the U.S. on Dec. 5.**

PREMIOS PLATINO
Mejor Película de Animación
XII Edición 2025

30 Edición 2024
PremiosFORQUÉ
Mejor Largometraje de Animación

39 PREMIOS GOYA
GRANADA
MEJOR PELÍCULA DE ANIMACIÓN

XVII PREMIS GAUDÍ
MILLOR PEL·LÍCULA D'ANIMACIÓ

GANADOR
Premios Quirino
MEJOR LARGOMETRAJE
2025

A THEORY FOR SOME
REALITY FOR MILLIONS

BLACK BUTTERFLIES

A FILM BY DAVID BAUTE

39º FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE CINE DE MAR DEL PLATA
2024

55th
20-28 Nov 2024
Official Selection

OFFICIAL SELECTION
ANNECY 2024
COMPETITION

SITGES
OFFICIAL SELECTION
2024

idfa
Official Selection
2024

FESTIVAL DE CINE DE LA HABANA

OFFICIAL SELECTION
MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
2024

festival internacional de cine panamá

Festival Internacional de Cine de Cali

ICC
Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage
Carthage Film Festival

XVIII ANIVERSARIO
FESTIVAL DE CINE GLOBAL SANTO DOMINGO

DOCS[MX]
SELECCIÓN OFICIAL
2024

An IKIRU FILMS, TINGLADO FILM, ANANGU GRUP, TUNCHE FILMS and CORPORACIÓ CATALANA DE MITJANS AUDIOVISUALS production, with the participation of RADIO TELEVISIÓN ESPAÑOLA, 3CAT, TELEVISIÓN PÚBLICA DE CANARIAS, MOGAMBO, with the finance of GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA-MINISTERIO DE CULTURA-ICAA and the support of ICEC-DEPARTAMENT DE CULTURA-GENERALITAT DE CATALUNYA, GOBIERNO DE CANARIAS, CABILDO INSULAR DE TENERIFE "BLACK BUTTERFLIES" sound supervisor ORIOL TARRAGÓ music by DIEGO NAVARRO canción original RUBÉN BLADES editor CLARA MARTÍNEZ MALAGELADA art director and cinematographer MARÍA PULIDO animation director PEPE SÁNCHEZ executive producer ELSA HERNÁNDEZ ANNA EULÀLIA RUIZ, AISHLY MANRIQUE written by YAIZA BERROCAL original idea DAVID BAUTE produced by EDMON ROCH, DAVID BAUTE, MARC SABÉ, CÉSAR ZELADA directed by DAVID BAUTE

THE FAST AND

Studio 100 Film/Qvisten Animation's new animated feature *Rally—From Paris to the Pyramids* offers all the great thrills of a major global adventure.

Norwegian director Rasmus A. Siversten is no stranger to ambitious, international animated features. He is the man behind Euro crowd pleasers such as *Three Robbers and a Lion*, *Kurt Turns Evil, Captain Sabertooth and the Magic Diamond, Just Super* and last year's eyebrow-raising *Spermageddon!* His latest project is a movie about an eccentric inventor and his two unlikely friends (a brave magpie and a shy hedgehog) who find themselves competing against a horrible tech billionaire in the legendary Paris-to-the-Pyramids rally in a very special racecar. Siversten discussed his new venture, *Rally — From Paris to the Pyramids*, which is produced by Qvisten Animation and distributed by Studio 100 Film, in a recent email interview.

"I wanted to make a spectacular racing movie for the whole family starring Norway's most famous and beloved characters: Solan & Ludvig," he notes. "Cars, speed and playful vehicles have always fascinated me, and I know that I share this fascination with many more, both young and old, girls and boys. And in this film our heroes build a cool looking, super-fast, home-made racing car with loads of hidden features and gadgets. It´s extra interesting when this scruffy gang from rural Norway takes this home-made, clunky, underdog of a car to compete in a car race against a cynical tech billionaire from California!"

Wheels of Glory

Siversten began work in early 2021, fleshing out the main story elements before getting the animation writer Rob Sprackling (*Gnomeo & Juliet, The Queen's Corgi*) on board. "I´m very happy that he saw the potential in the concept and that he connected with the story and characters," says the director. "Even though this is a fast and wild racing film, it is the friendship between the bold magpie Solan and the anxious hedgehog Ludvig that is the true heart of the movie."

Sprackling built the story around how their bond is tested when they enter the world's greatest rally. "Knowing the world audiences, Rob also added international aspects, like the film's villain, electric car manufacturer and billionaire Ellen Busk," he explains. "To add the local flavor, Norwegian screenwriter Karsten Fullu did a pass on the final script. Rob and Karsten´s partnership ensured a blend of humor, local charm and emotional depth."

The story's main inspiration came from the Norwegian author and illustrator Kjell Aukrust. "He invented these characters and the Flåklypa [Pinchcliffe] world," notes Siversten. "Aukrust was very fond of cars, speed and inventions. His drawings are an endless inspiration to me and many that works in the creative business in Norway. Who wouldn't love to animate these cars?"

Another source of inspiration were rip-roaring American movies from the 1970s. "I was also inspired by all the fun-packed car movies I watched as a child — *Cannonball Run* and *Smokey and the Bandit,* among others," mentions Siversten. "I think humor and cars are a good match. *Rally — From Paris to the Pyramids* is not made to only entertain kids, the film has loads of jokes and relatable themes for the parents (and even grandparents) in the theater. I want the film to work for all ages; therefore, it must also connect emotionally to all ages. The satire and the emotional depth will reach mostly the older audience, the speed and the slapstick will entertain the youngest."

The film's animation is produced by Qvisten in Oslo, Norway. "We have about 80 talented artists at our studio here," says the director. "Everybody is gathered under one roof in one factory of fun creativity. I really believe that there is a huge gain from having a team working physically together over time, gaining experience from film to film, learning from each other, and inspiring each other."

Siversten says working together at the studio is also very efficient. "We save a lot of money doing it this way," he notes. "The film also gets so much funnier and looks so much better just because everyone contributes and share ideas daily. This kind of collaboration is harder

"I love playing around with different vehicles throughout the movie ... At the same time, I´m most proud of the warmer moments in the film, the exploration of friendship, the relatable feelings of love, jealousy and losing your best friend."

DIRECTOR RASMUS A. SIVERSTEN

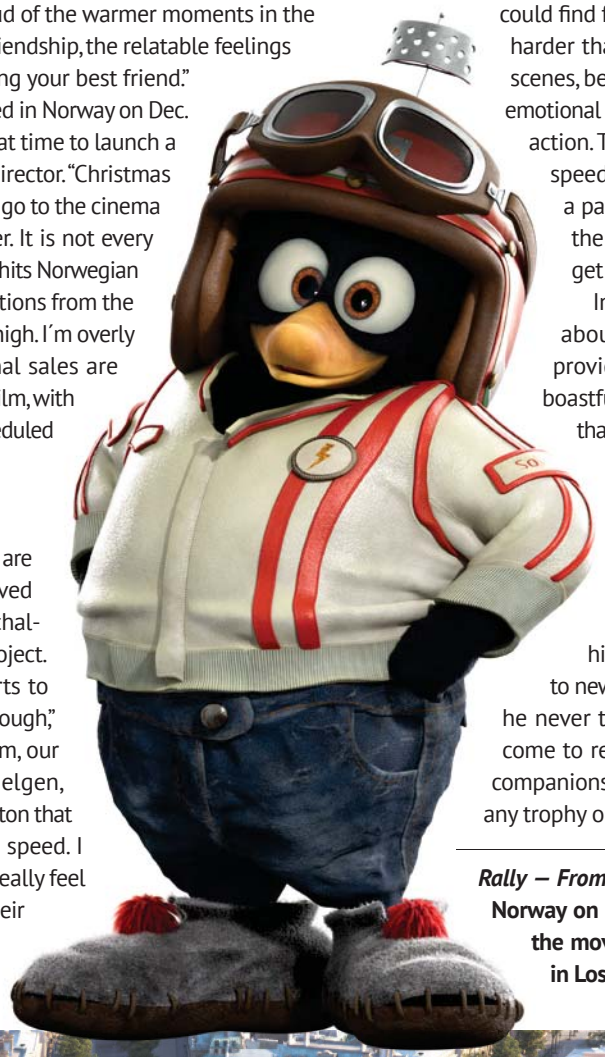
THE FUNNY

when a production is chopped up in smaller parts and spread around the world to different studios. At Qvisten, a storyboard artist can add a missing piece of the story, an animator can incorporate a joke, because everybody is fully committed to the story we are telling. *Rally — From Paris to the Pyramids* has a steam punkish, caricatured view of the world. The film blends classical cartoony characters with a quirky, semi-realistic setting."

The helmer describes the overall look of the film as realistic and highly detailed, a heightened world where wild and absurd things happens. "We take the audience on a visual ride," says Siversten. "The film starts in snowy Norway, then we move on to springtime in Paris, before traveling through the Alps and the green heart of Italy. The race ends in the dry desert of Egypt, passing the Sphinx. It is a long journey, where we can play with known landmarks along the way. The leaning tower of Pisa is being pushed into place by mistake. I bet you didn't know that the Eiffel Tower has a *Lady and the Tramp*-like balcony for special guests?"

Siversten loved playing around with different vehicles throughout the movie. "In the race our heroes race against a hypermodern robot-controlled electric car, a wind-powered sail car, a nuclear rocket car, a coal-fueled train car and even a massive American diesel hot rod — each design adds creativity and humor to the race," says Siversten. "At the same time, I´m most proud of the warmer moments in the film, the exploration of friendship, the relatable feelings of love, jealousy and losing your best friend."

The film will be released in Norway on Dec. 25 this year. "This is a great time to launch a family feature," says the director. "Christmas is the time when families go to the cinema to do something together. It is not every day that a Flåklypa movie hits Norwegian cinemas, and the expectations from the Norwegian audience are high. I´m overly excited! The international sales are managed by Studio 100 Film, with international releases scheduled for 2026."



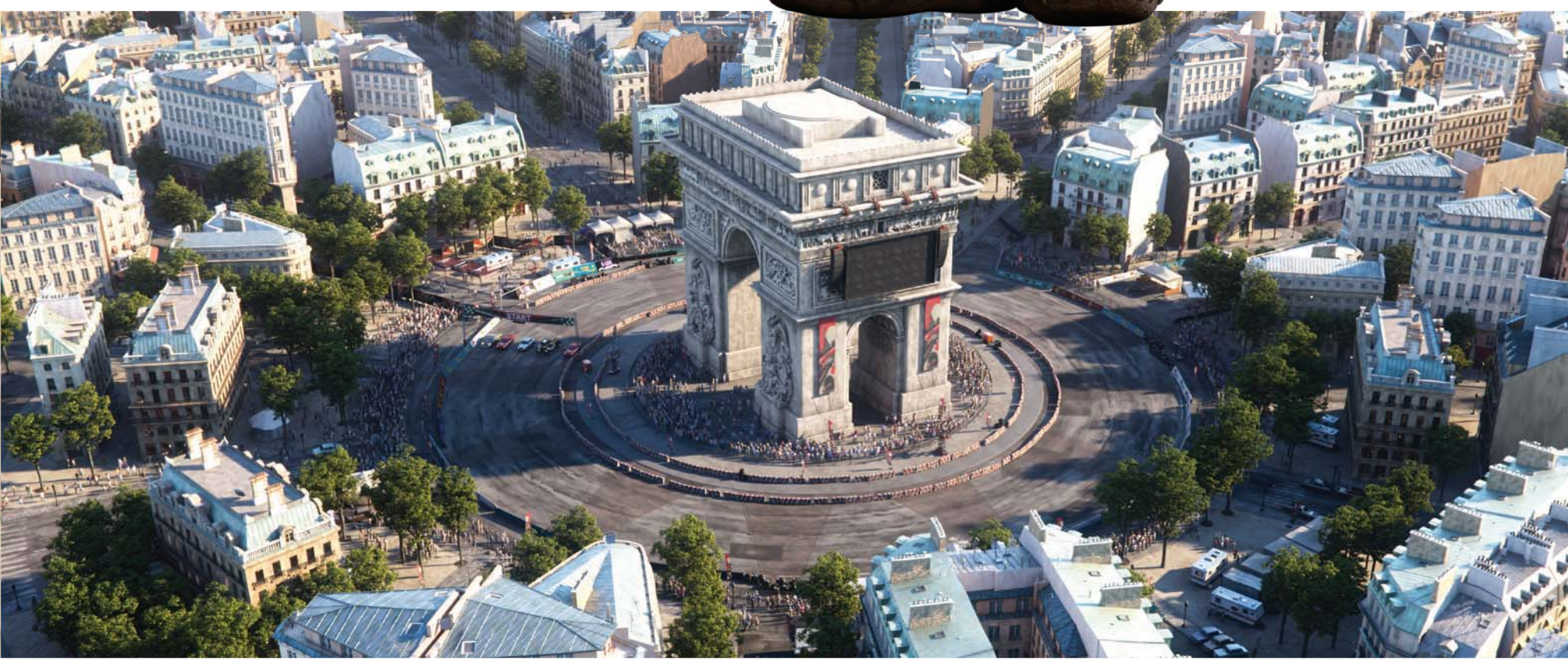
Immersive Thrills

The film's exciting, "you are there" racing scenes proved to be some of the most challenging aspects of the project. "I wanted the racing parts to feel real, immersive, and rough," says Siversten. "In the film, our inventor hero, Reodor Felgen, has installed a special button that gives our hero car extra speed. I wanted our audience to really feel this change of speed in their stomachs. So, we looked at any racing film we could find for reference and inspiration. It is harder than you think to get good racing scenes, because every shot must create an emotional response in addition to speed and action. The camera position, the cars, the speed, the surroundings, they all play a part in creating great racing — and the shots can look *so* bad until you get it right."

In the end, it's the film's message about friendship and humility that provide *Rally*'s emotional heart. "The boastful magpie Solan's journey shows that ambition and the pursuit of fame are empty compared to the value of having a loyal friend like Ludvig by your side," the director points out. "The shy and frightened hedgehog Ludvig, in turn, learns that stepping beyond his comfort zone can open the door to new relationships and achievements he never thought possible. Together, they come to realize that love, loyalty and true companionship are far greater rewards than any trophy or victory in a car race!" ■

Speed Racers: A brilliant inventor, and his animal friends Solan and Ludvig compete against an evil tech billionaire in a global race in the upcoming movie, *Rally — From Paris to the Pyramids*.

***Rally — From Paris to the Pyramids* opens in Norway on Dec. 25. Studio 100 Film brings the movie to the American Film Market in Los Angeles in November.**



Italy's Rainbow Celebrates 30 Years of Magic

Studio founder Iginio Straffi discusses the new *Winx Club: The Magic Is Back* and plans for the future.

2025 has been a super busy year for Italy's Rainbow, the powerhouse animation studio behind the *Winx* property and recent hits such as *Huntik: Secrets & Seekers, 44 Cats, Mermaid Magic* and *Gormiti: The New Era*. The studio's dynamic founder Iginio Straffi and his team have been celebrating the company's 30th anniversary, and in September, they introduced *Winx Club: The Magic Is Back,* a fresh CG-animated take on the fashion-savvy fairies on Netflix. We had the chance to chat with Straffi about the new show and his plans for his multi-faceted Rainbow Group, which also owns Rainbow CGI (Italy's largest CGI and VFX house) and Vancouver's Bardel Entertainment, which produces the animation for *The Dragon Prince* and *Rick and Morty:*

Fairy Tale: Created by Rainbow founder Iginio Straffi, *Winx Club: The Magic Is Back* tells the story of Bloom, a teenage girl from planet Earth who discovers she is a fairy.

Animation Magazine: Congrats on the debut of your new *Winx Club: The Magic Is Back*. What makes this take on the property special and different from previous incarnations?

The *Winx* phenomenon first captured audiences more than two decades ago, and it's remained central to our creative identity ever since. We felt the time was right to develop a fresh series where we reimagined the *Winx* world for a new generation while honouring everything that made the original so beloved.

While maintaining the original and unmistakable DNA of the first original season, this reboot takes the story back to its beginnings to explores how the Winx Club was formed and who these girls are – with fresh eyes, reigniting the sense of friendship, courage and magic that defined the early seasons. The biggest evolution comes through the animation itself: we've embraced cutting-edge production techniques to give the series a fresh, contemporary look that connects with today's audience.

Despite the modern approach, the heart of *Winx* remains the same. The show continues to champion empowerment, diversity, and self-belief—themes that were ahead of their time in the early 2000s and feel just as relevant, if not more so, today.

When did work on the show begin and when is the delivery?

We started working on the new series back in 2023. The concept took shape gradually — It was important for us to evolve the storytelling in a more contemporary direction while staying true to the original spirit of the brand. The writing process alone took almost two years, followed by an extensive production period.

The first 13 of the 26 episodes have already been delivered, with premieres rolling out internationally. We launched in September in the U.K. on BBC's CBBC and iPlayer, in October in Italy on Rai and on TF1 in France. The show is also available globally on Netflix, with further broadcast launches planned in additional territories over the coming months.

What do you love best about this new series?

What I love most are the values at the heart of the show: friendship, teamwork, and respect for others and for nature. I also love the characters themselves. Each of the Winx girls has her own personality, strengths, and vulnerabilities, and it's through their differences that they learn to support one another and accomplish extraordinary things. It's a timeless message about unity and empowerment that feels more relevant than ever today.

The series is produced in CGI, using state-of-the-art 3D animation technologies to bring the world of *Winx* to life with a fresh, cinematic look. Production is carried out between studios in Italy and across Europe, under the close creative supervision of the Rainbow team to ensure consistency in style, storytelling, and quality throughout the process.

Congrats on you're the studio's 30th anniversary this year. When you look back at all that Rainbow has achieved over the years, what are you proudest of?

Ever since I was a child, I've wanted to tell stories. Today, I'm proud to have built a company that brings stories of courage, imagination, and values to life. From the very beginning, Rainbow's mission has been to inspire younger generations to dream big, believe in themselves, and see the world as a place full of possibility.

Over the years, Rainbow has grown into a truly international creative hub, but our core purpose has always remained the same: to tell meaningful stories that entertain, empower and leave a positive mark on audiences everywhere.

Can you share some of the exciting plans for Rainbow in the near future?

Rainbow has grown enormously over the years, expanding from animation into live-action production while continuing to tell stories that resonate across generations. We're currently working on Season 2 of *Mermaid Magic*, following the huge success of the first season, which achieved top rankings in several territories.

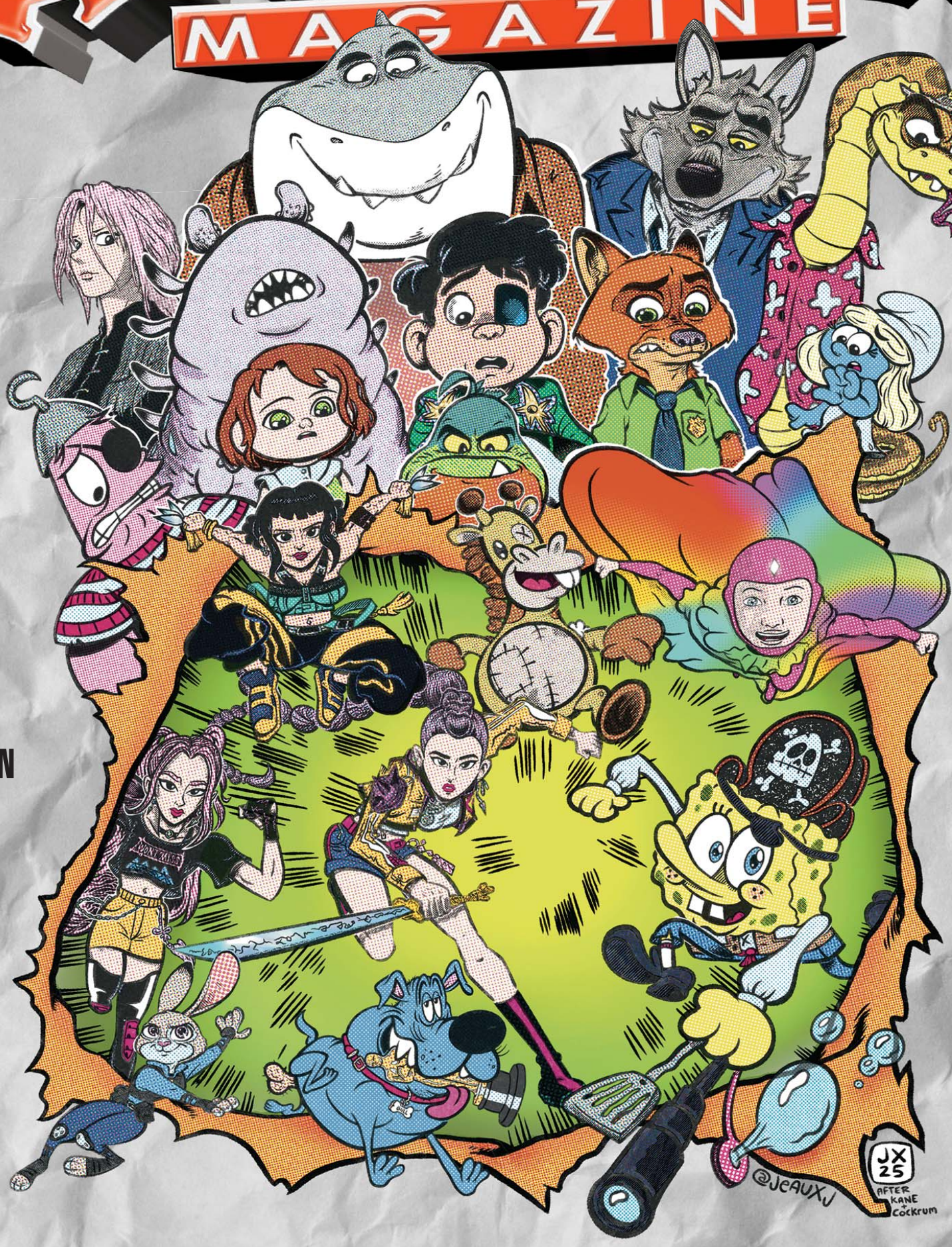
Of course, *Winx Club* remains our central focus, with new content already in development to unlock new magic for both long-time fans and new audiences. Beyond these flagship titles, we're producing a diverse slate of films and series for theatrical release and streaming platforms, designed to engage kids, young adults and families around the world.

What is your take on the fast-changing world of animation as we approach 2026?

The animation landscape is evolving faster than ever, driven by both creative innovation and technological advancement. New tools, platforms and viewing habits are constantly reshaping how stories are told and experienced. But despite all the change, one thing remains the same — the power of great storytelling and authentic characters. I believe the future will belong to studios that can combine cutting-edge technology with constant research and emotional depth, creating stories that not only entertain but also inspire and connect with audiences around the world. ■

***Winx Club: The Magic Is Back* is currently streaming on Netflix. An exclusive Game Hub *Winx Club: Magix* has also launched *on Roblox*. You can learn more about the studio at rrbw.it/en.**

ANIMATION MAGAZINE



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AN EARLY GUIDE TO THE YEAR'S OSCAR-QUALIFIED ANIMATED SHORTS
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CONNOISSEUR'S CHOICE

A HIGHLY SUBJECTIVE GUIDE TO THE TOP ANIMATED SHORTS OF 2025

By Chris Robinson

From the festival circuit, this looks like a wide-open year for shorts chasing the statuette named after Steve Austin's (a.k.a. The Six Million Dollar Man) boss. Audience favorites are scattered, and festival wins rarely predict academy taste. So here's a two-lane list: films I love that probably won't meet Oscar Goldman and titles I didn't go lady (or, if you prefer, radio) gaga over but that are carrying real festival buzz. I won't tell you which is which though!

Chris Robinson has been the artistic director of the Ottawa International Animation Festival (OIAF) for the past 25 years and has authored numerous books on independent animation, including *Stole This From a Hockey Card, Canadian Animation, Ballad of a Thin Man* and *Raw Outrage: The Films of Phil Mulloy.* He also wrote the screenplay for the award-winning animated short film *Lipsett Diaries*.

The Girl Who Cried Pearls

Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski, Canada
From the Oscar-nominated makers of *Madame Tutli-Putli*, Clyde Henry (Chris Lavis & Maciek Szczerbowski) returns with a retro-glossed stop-motion fable about stories — the seductive myths we sell to others and ourselves. On his 80th birthday, a wealthy grandfather catches his granddaughter pocketing a rare pearl and, to explain its origin, rewinds to a childhood meeting with a girl whose tears turned to jewels. Miniature worlds — from a faded Parisian villa to a 1910 Montreal tenement — are rendered with tactile textures, lifelike puppets and gliding camera moves, while Patrick Watson's haunting score threads through greed, loss and the fragile magic of small wonders.

Dog Alone

Marta Reis Andrade, Portugal
A documentary-adjacent short with an earthy palette punctuated by sharp accents, *Dog Alone* follows a troubled young woman who escapes the alienating city for her recently widowed grandfather's rural home. There she drifts through neighbors, family, the countryside — and an abandoned dog — each encounter echoing her own isolation. What begins in disconnection resolves into a quiet study of care: generations knitting together, a community reappearing at the edges and a life retuned by shaking off the world's noise to find balance, calm and purpose.

Dollhouse Elephant

Jenny Jokela, Finland
After the scalpel-sharp *Sweet Like Lemons* (2023), Jokela is back with *Dollhouse Elephant*, an acrylic-on-paper dazzler. A layered choral score sets the thesis: One off-key voice can splinter the whole. Brushstrokes bend and buckle with each crescendo, staging the tug-of-war between communal harmony and individual drive. In brisk, painterly set pieces, the film asks whether solidarity can hold in a world tuned to the solo — without muting the soloist.

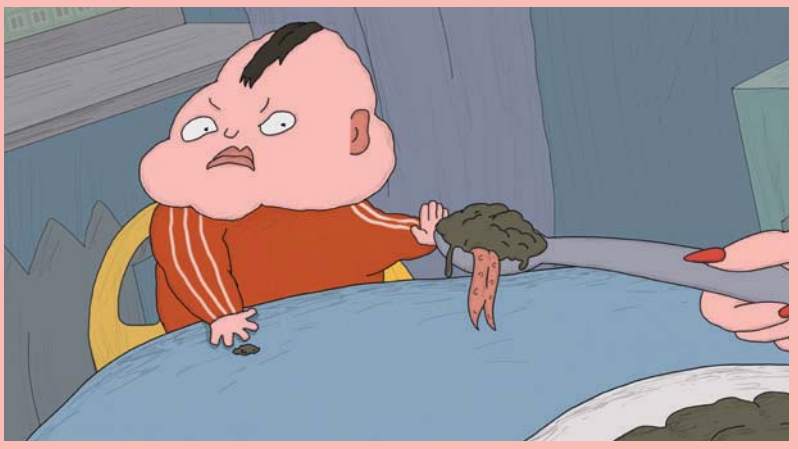
Life With an Idiot

Theodore Ushev, France
After a brief live-action detour, Ushev returns to animation with a Kafka-tinged tragicomedy, co-adapted with his daughter Alexandra from a book by Victor Erofeyev. Dominique Pinon voices Vladimir, a twice-widowed everyman hauled before faceless authorities and ordered to atone for his unremarkable life by housing an "idiot" — a mandate that quickly curdles into farce. Set to a skirling operatic vocal, the film's fluid watercolor on paper and jittery, hand-painted frames — evoking Koji Yamamura's *A Country Doctor* — splinter as Vladimir's reality does. A whirlwind of collapsing borders and restless color, it's among Ushev's most unsettling work, prodding a spectacle-numb world with a final barb: Who's the idiot, exactly?

Shadows

Rand Beiruty, France/Jordan
Amid the churn of an airport, 15-year-old Ahlam watches the crowd until a stray deer slips past— an uncanny spark that unlocks a rush of memory. The film toggles between her hushed inner monologue and the prying looks around her as she recalls a marriage at 13 to an abusive, unstable husband, a birth at 14 and a child taken soon after. Now, fleeing Baghdad, she moves toward the gate with those shadows still attached. Lush, painterly backdrops belie how raw this is. Drawn from interviews with Ahlam, *Shadows* uses expressive shifts in perspective to make her past feel immediate — and to ask whether crossing a border can ever outpace the pain that follows.

Kyiv Cake



Mykyta Lyskov, Ukraine/Estonia
From the creator of the cult short *Deep Love* (2019), *Kyiv Cake* is a bracing, surreal tour of Ukrainian life under pressure. It opens on a trotting, crooning deer to a Eurodance thump, then narrows to a struggling family: a husband wrestling the electricity meter; toothpaste bleeding the Russian tricolor as a tooth drops; a near-empty fridge holding a Kyiv Cake box that hides a Ukrainian passport. The husband sprouts wings, a missile rips the building, and the son fires back with the Snake Island defiance: "Russian warship, go fuck yourself!"

Working with an Estonian studio, Lyskov channels a tradition of Baltic absurdism — stacked symbols, mordant humor, dream logic — to smuggle hard truths past the rational mind. Raw, anxious and angry, *Kyiv Cake* refuses despair, searching for something possible inside the impossible — something bearable carved from the unbearable.

Il Burattino e la Balena [The Puppet and the Whale]

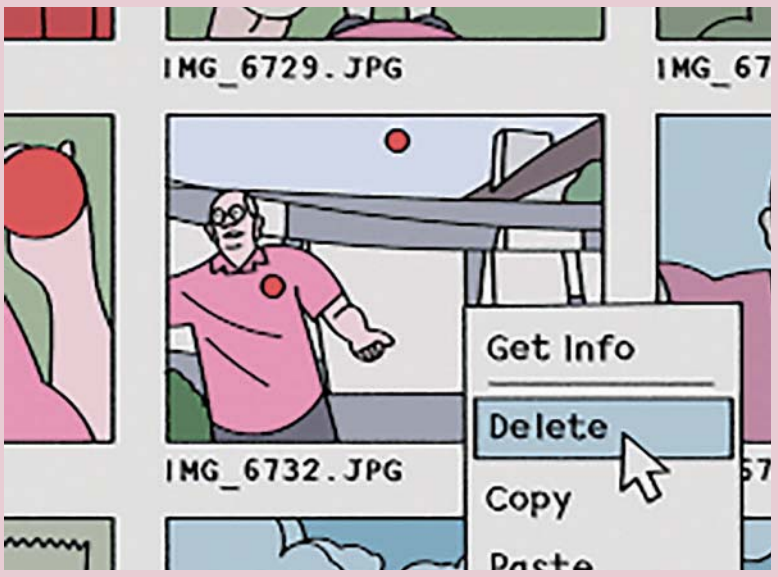
Roberto Catani, Italy
Catani — of *La Sagra* and *La Funabola* — returns with a hand-drawn fable, *Il Burattino e la Balena*. Pinocchio splinters into life: a testy toe-tap, then a cap that turns play into threat. He climbs a narrow stair to a procession moving with machine precision, as if all carved from the same plank. Catani's stark line collapses puppet and person, asking what choice survives when every step feels pulled by unseen strings.

Silent Cinema

Krste Gospodinovski, North Macedonia
A man remembers threading reels with his father — a faded silent-film star-turned-projectionist — in a crumbling movie house devoted to silents. In the theater's underbelly he discovers a secret: his father quietly screening sound films, a forbidden world the boy never knew existed and the father hopes to keep hidden.

This stop-motion puppet elegy to early cinema — and to its many fallen stars — is also a tender father-son portrait. Its hand-built aesthetic becomes a love letter to the communal spell of moviegoing, now dimmed as viewing shifts from public rooms to private screens. Without scolding, the film questions our appetite for "progress" — the restless chase for new tools and sensations — and suggests that the promise of tomorrow too easily eclipses the grace of the present.

Retirement Plan



John Kelly, USA
John Kelly's *Retirement Plan* strips away ornament to let timing and voice do the work. Over stark, minimalist visuals, Domhnall Gleeson inhabits a man cataloging everything he'll do after he retires; as the list swells, confidence curdles into denial. The humor lands with a slow ache, and the restraint sharpens the film's point: Self-delusion is funnier — and sadder — when there's nowhere to hide.

Poor Marciano

Alex Rey, Spain
Rey's *Poor Marciano* is a deadpan comedy about inherited obsession and shame. Marciano grows up under Paco, a father whose devotion to the band Crash Test Dummies amounts to zealotry; when the kid sneaks Tears for Fears, he's sent to bed hungry. The joke stays ruthlessly focused as Marciano retreats into science, becomes a reclusive astrophysicist and develops a furtive, compulsive private life.

Rey keeps the tone straight-faced and the rhythm precise, letting a single ridiculous fixation snowball until Marciano is tasked with sending Earth's first official message to martians — and fumbles it spectacularly. What starts as a one-note gag turns unexpectedly sharp: a portrait of how pop culture burrows into us, warps our desires and dictates our scripts. It's brisk, a little cruel, oddly tender — and as stubbornly catchy as the song that haunts it.

The Night Boots

Pierre-Luc Granjon, France
On his way to bed — while his parents bustle to host visiting friends — Elliot slips on his rubber boots and wanders into the dark, where a curious beast ushers him through the forest's nocturnal life — a tribute to the weird, luminous charge of childhood curiosity. Rendered in a misty pinscreen that recalls Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* and Norstein's *Tale of Tales*, the film's fog-softened textures lend Elliot's night wanderings a dreamy, poetic hush — retro animation catnip. *The Night Boots* pulled off the rare Annecy double this year, winning both the Cristal for Best Animated Short and the Audience Prize.

An Iron Age Heroine

Cartoon Saloon's Nora Twomey and director Giovanna Ferrari introduce us to their unforgettable red-headed warrior, Éiru.

By Ramin Zahed

There's always a special buzz in the animation community when Ireland's beloved studio Cartoon Saloon delivers a new project. This year, a lyrical short titled *Éiru* — directed by studio veteran Giovanna Ferrari and produced by founder/producer/director Nora Twomey — has been receiving acclaim on the festival circuit and is aiming straight for the Oscar shortlist in the months ahead.

Ferrari, who has worked in various capacities on projects such as *Song of the Sea, The Breadwinner, Wolfwalkers* and *Star Wars: Visions*, answered a few of our questions about her memorable 2D-animated short, which centers on a brave young Iron Age warrior who saves her village from a mysterious drought by journeying deep into the earth.

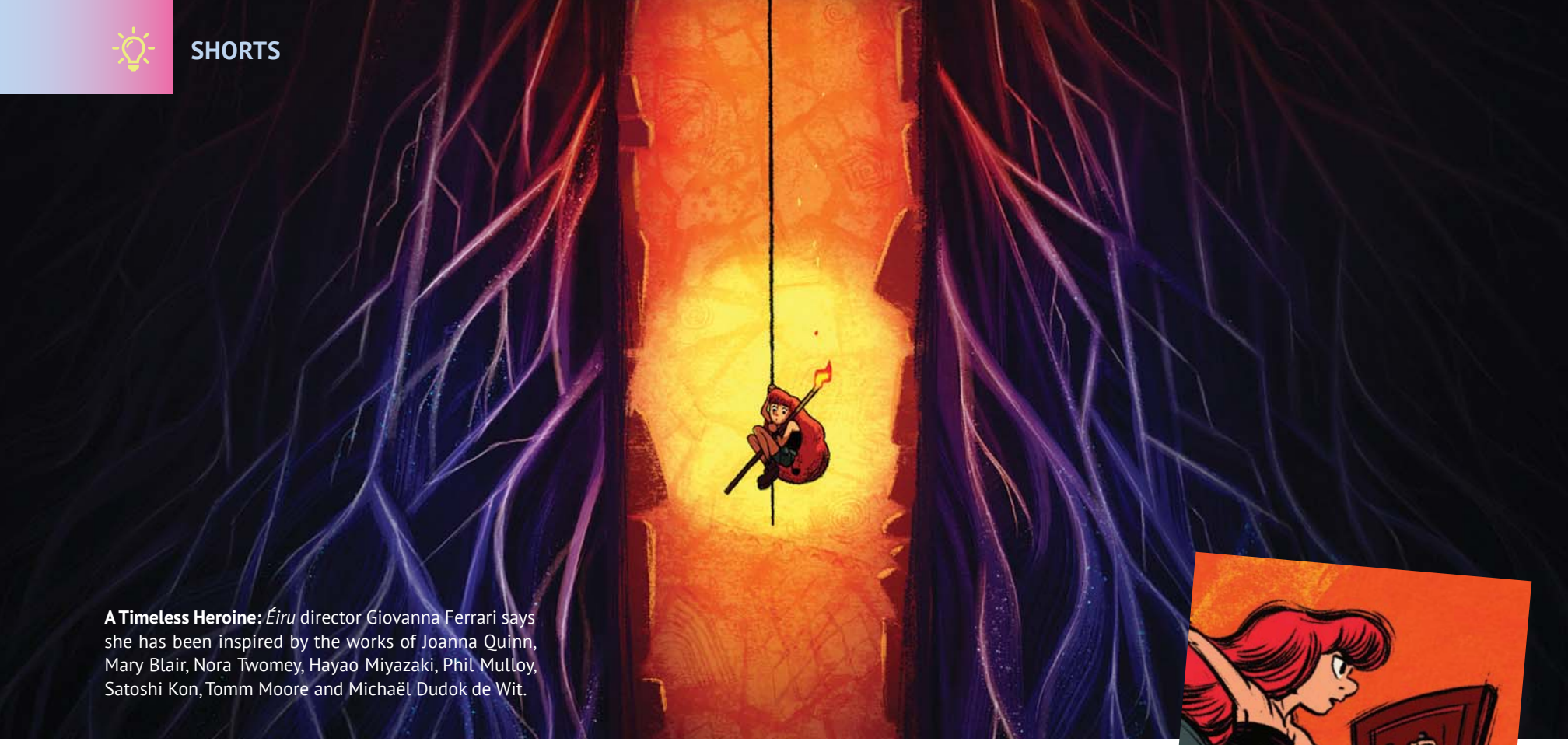
"I am the proud mother of a teenage girl, so the memory of the early days of her adolescence is fresh in my mind," explains Ferrari. "I remember myself at that age, the eagerness to please mixed with the need to rebel, that conflict between what I knew I was supposed to be and who I really was, the awkwardness of being a girl in a men's world, in which the only way to be enough is to pretend to be a boy. This eternal female quest of finding yourself and your values, it's something I still interrogate myself about every day, and it's at the essence of Éiru's personality."

Female Power

Ferrari had been working at Cartoon Saloon for many years, as an animator, a storyboard artist and then as head of story. Twomey says she was excited to see what she could do with an opportunity to direct her own short. "Around that time, we were approached by Melanie Lynch, who is a founder of an organization called Herstory," recalls the producer. "The aim of Herstory is to shine a light on women and female perspectives that have often been excluded or minimized in storytelling mediums such as film. So with Herstory, Screen Ireland and BCP, Cartoon Saloon went into production with a concept Giovanna had been developing in the studio, centering on a young girl called Éiru who wants to be a warrior."

Twomey points out that shorts are expensive to produce inside a studio with overhead and an experienced crew. While the studio has delivered acclaimed shorts, such as Twomey's own *From Darkness* (2002), Adrien Merigeau and Alan Holly's *Old Fangs* (2009) and Louise Bagnall's Oscar-winning *Late Afternoon* (2017), it doesn't have a regular shorts initiative. "We have produced shorts in the past, as part of Screen Ireland and the national broadcaster's (RTÉ) Frameworks grant scheme, but *Éiru* was made outside of that avenue," she explains. "We took advantage of a slight gap between productions to get

"Some of the themes are pretty universal and speak of the particular moment we face on earth ... Some are more personal, intimate, like my particular experience as a woman and as an expat and experiences of families around me."
Director Giovanna Ferrari



A Timeless Heroine: *Éiru* director Giovanna Ferrari says she has been inspired by the works of Joanna Quinn, Mary Blair, Nora Twomey, Hayao Miyazaki, Phil Mulloy, Satoshi Kon, Tomm Moore and Michaël Dudok de Wit.

it started, and with an artist like Giovanna, who can do so much with a small team, made the most of the opportunity."

Ferrari began work on her short in 2022 for a few months, during which she did some research, drew a lot of concepts and wrote a synopsis and some director notes. Then she started again in spring 2023, and from then on it took her and the team a year to complete the whole movie. "For the character animation, we mainly used TVPaint, with some exceptions," she mentions. "We used Moho for some of the smaller background characters and some of the clan warriors; it helped to create a difference between the fluid and nuanced way Éiru moves and the very simple, rugged aspects of the warriors' characters. FX used a mix of Toon Boom and TVPaint."

The filmmaker says one of the toughest aspects of the production was figuring out what the underground mycelium and the visions inside it would look like. "I had a very clear idea in my mind, but I didn't have the time to experiment and look for a pipeline that would allow me to successfully transpose on screen what I had in my mind in the time we had," says Ferrari. "This meant that we had to compromise a lot and become very creative to find a solution that would fit all the scenes in the mycelium."

"I am very pleased with the layering of the movie's narrative," she adds "I love that each person in the audience comes away with their own connection to the theme and the character, depending on their own life experience. I was hoping to allow the audience to fill some gaps with their own interpretations, and so far it looks like it worked! That makes me very happy."

Messages From the Heart

The director also points out that there are several layers and themes woven into the story. "Some of them are pretty universal and speak of the particular moment we face on earth and the challenges we and younger generations face," she notes. "Some are more personal, intimate, like my particular experience as a woman and as an expat and experiences of families around me."

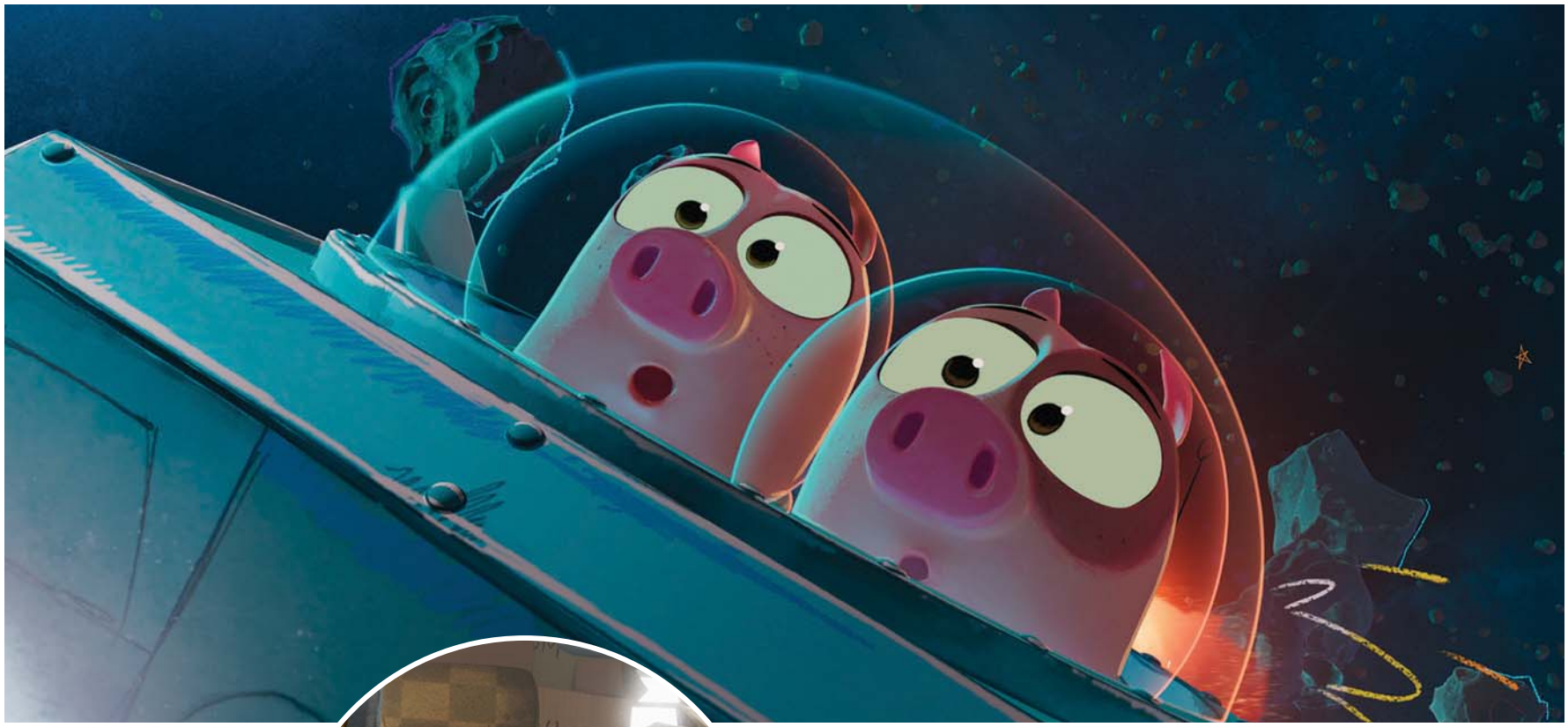
When asked about the biggest lesson she learned during the production, Ferrari says, "Once again, I learnt a lesson I seem to keep on learning in animation: Patience is your best friend! For more than 20 years, I have been working on other people's movies as a head of story, as an animator, as a storyboard artist; I have been consulting on dozens of other people's scripts, and all this has given me a lot of knowledge that now I can channel into making my own movie."

She concludes, "I feel it's such an incredible chance because it made my life so much easier while directing my own short. It took away all the insecurities and fears I would have had if confronted with directing earlier on in my career!" ■

***Éiru* will screen with GKIDS' *Little Amélie or the Character of Rain*, in U.S. theaters Nov. 7.**

Imagination to the Rescue

How director J.P. Vine mined his own childhood to create Locksmith Animation's poignant short *Cardboard*.



An overwhelmed single dad finds renewed hope in life through his kids' imaginations in *Cardboard*, Locksmith Animation's first original short, directed by J.P. Vine. Best known for helming the feature *Ron's Gone Wrong* (2021) and working as story artist on features such as Locksmith's *That Christmas* and Pixar's *Inside Out,* Vine used his own childhood as inspiration for the project.

"I was driving my family, loaded down with travel gear, along a particularly empty stretch of the I-80 across Nevada," he recalls. "I kept passing abandoned trailer parks out in the scrub. They got me wondering, who had made their lives there, and why? The widescreen landscape and skyscape all added to the atmosphere, so I began percolating on setting a story there. But I didn't have the heart of the story until I combined it with a memory from my own family history — when we were without a home for a time when I was a kid. I tinkered with a family arriving at a place like those trailer parks, how they would react and built from there."

He adds, "As a wannabe cartoonist, I was always getting lost in comic books for days or roaming with the dog in the woods outside. I wanted to celebrate that — the weird magic of the way a kid experiences the world."

After working on several studio features, Vine welcomed the freedom and possibilities of the short format. "A feature project feels like an unwieldy tanker ship, with so many stakeholders and monumental goals to hit," he explains. "For the short, I was free to build a lean team with tons of talent, who were doing it for the love of getting an original short done. Production was post-feature therapy for me!"

Watercolor Wonderland

Cardboard was made in a traditional CG pipeline. "It took a lot of care to build the illustrative look, brilliantly executed with Andy Baggarley, our VFX supervisor — watercolor textures, hand-painted elements everywhere, 2D effects," says Vine. "I wanted to channel the ink work of the concept art and kids' drawings but place it all in a world that had scale and atmosphere."

While the short went very smoothly on the creative side, getting it up and running in production was quite a challenge. "I'd been trying to make the short independently while at Pixar before shelving it to make *Ron's Gone Wrong*," Vine recalls. "I tried again with numerous potential partners, always with promise, but plans kept falling apart. It became a bit of a cycle of hope and failure, and I just had to be patient for the right window. I'm so grateful to Locksmith, who finally championed the project, brought in partners like Ritzy Animation and DNEG, and gave me the backing of a major studio while still letting it feel personal."

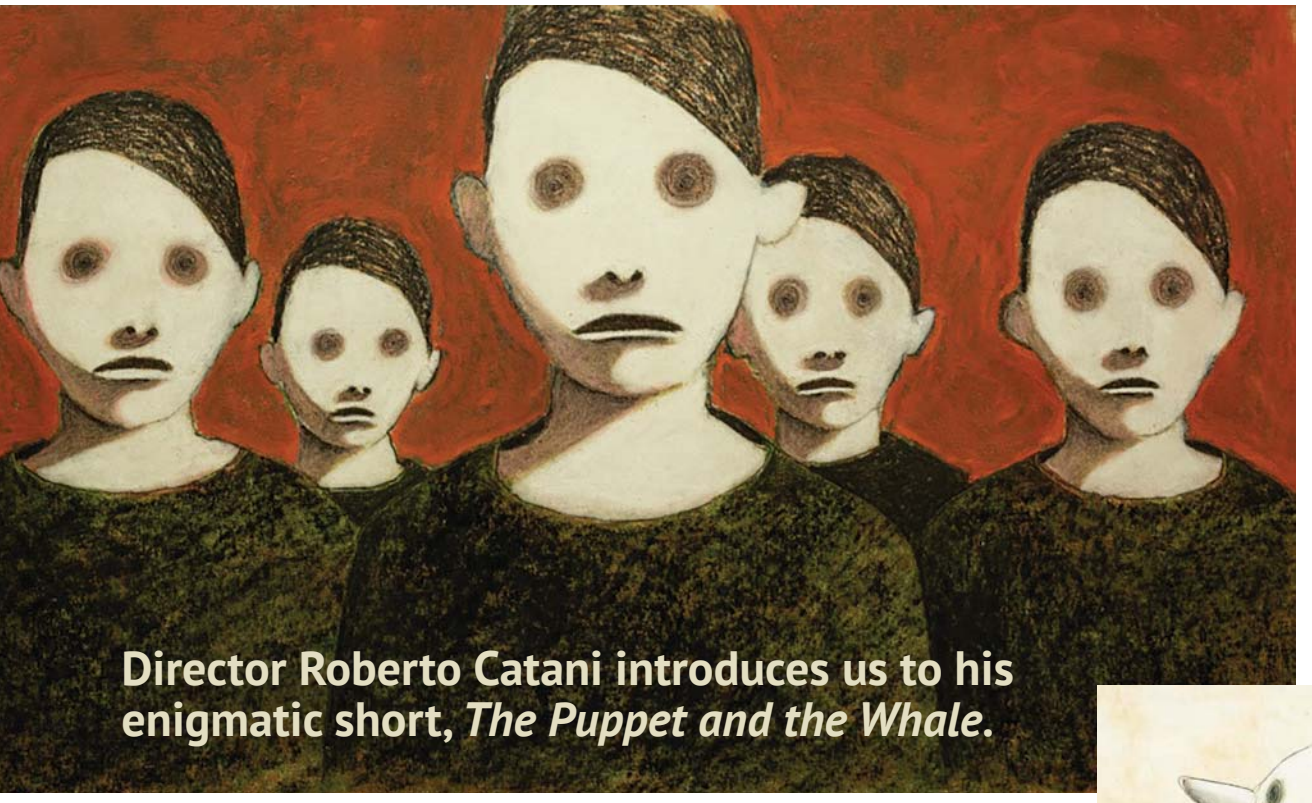
Vine loves the fact that the short hits audiences in two ways: Young audiences giggle along and invest themselves in the piglets' adventures, while adults are affected differently. "I'm glad we pulled off that duality, and hopefully we leave the audience delighted by the end," says the director. "I also loved the making of it. Having Locksmith and so many talented people surround and transform a personal story like this was an unforgettable experience."

Looking back at his animation career beginnings, Vine says, "Even though I always loved to draw, I had been struggling along working in theater for a while. I somehow finagled my way into Aardman Animations as a set dresser. After going to my first dailies, I decided the animators were definitely having the most fun and something just clicked. I was 27 and a bit of a latecomer, but folks at Aardman were a great support and gave me feedback on my horrendous first attempts. I even got some rabbit animation in the movie!"

LOVE FOR COMICS:
J.P. Vine says his heroes have always been cartoonists like Bill Watterson, Gary Larson, Raymond Briggs, Quentin Blake, Ralph Steadman, Hergé, Uderzo and Franquin.

The director has great advice for industry newcomers: "My career has not been straightforward," he admits. "I discovered a love of animation almost by accident. I mostly focused on one question: How do I get to the heart of the action? That's why I wanted to move to London, or get to Pixar, or direct a film — I always wanted to be around talented people doing great work. So if I had advice, in the early stages, try to get experience with people you respect, whether they are friends or studios. It may take a while to build the credibility. That's OK, it's a marathon. I started late and failed to get into Pixar the first time. Build your network through being helpful, driven and inquisitive. Get passionate about your craft. Trust your instincts, and if there's any doubt, story is king!" ■

Pulling Pinocchio's Strings



Director Roberto Catani introduces us to his enigmatic short, *The Puppet and the Whale*.

No Cricket In Sight: Roberto Catani's *The Puppet and the Whale* offers a stark look at a puppet who refuses to conform to traditional norms.

By Ramin Zahed

Last month, Roberto Catani's *Il Burattino et la balena* (*The Puppet and the Whale*) took home the Grand Prize for Best Animated Short at the Ottawa Intl. Animation Festival, making it automatically qualified to be considered for the Academy Award. The short, which is produced by Miyu, La Sept and Withstand Films, is a surreal take on Pinocchio, centering on a haunted puppet who doesn't become a boy.

The festival judges praised the short's "ability to work with image, movement and sound," and liked the fact that it worked with an iconic character to pose important questions about conformity and society while remaining open-ended in its inventive approach. We were fortunate enough to catch up with the talented Italian illustrator, animation director and teacher to find out more about his memorable new project.

"I started developing the idea for the film in 2019, but the visual and conceptual work began the following year," Catani tells us. "The film, which has evolved considerably from its first version, took about two and a half years to complete — a period that would have been much longer without the support of two essential collaborators, Viola Mancini and Mariangela Malvaso, as well as the presence and encouragement of a committed production team."

Rebel Toy

The idea of working with the character of Pinocchio originated from a desire to tell the story of a figure who refuses to conform to the human model, in both the political and social sense of the term, the filmmaker explains. "This is a model he is ultimately destined to become, however," he points out. "The film attempts to express a rejection of a humanity that has lost its innocence and purity, its capacity for wonder, and has instead become cynically subservient. Pinocchio performs a gesture of rebellion against the human (and particularly adult) world that tries to impose its structure on him — drawing inspiration above all from Jean Vigo's magnificent film *Zero for Conduct*."

Catani whose previous festival favorites include *The Tightrope Walker* (2002), *Absent Minded* (2013) and *Per Tutta la Vita* (2018) prefers to use traditional hand-drawn animation to tell his stories. "All the drawings were made on paper and colored with mixed media — chalks, graphite, pastels, Oilbar, acrylics, drypoint and more — always on paper," he notes "The photography and editing phases, however, were carried out digitally."

The artist says his approach to animation comes from a creative path that began many years ago, when he attended the state Art School in Urbino. "I began that journey at the age of 14, in an environment that celebrated image-making through research and formal experimentation," Catani recalls. "We were not trained specifically in animation, but more broadly in the language of visual art in all its forms."

As a teen, Catani remembers skipping schools with his friends to attend his first animation festival. "It was in Lucca, Tuscany — far from our school — and it was there that I saw, for the first time, the films of an artist who profoundly changed my perception of animation: Yuri Norstein, the Russian master," he mentions. "I fell in love with his work then, and I still love it today. Over time, many other films and artists have shaped my vision of cinema and visual expression. Perhaps the artist who most influenced my personal path was Ursula Ferrara. Her beautiful films inspired me deeply and opened up expressive and poetic possibilities that felt very close to my own idea of cinema."

For many years, Catani has enjoyed teaching hand-drawn animation to students in public schools. "With my students, year after year, I explore the language and themes of animated cinema," he says. "I show them films and lead workshops designed to introduce young students to the techniques and expressive potential of drawn animation. These are long processes, usually spread over three years. This ongoing teaching work keeps me closely connected to the world of animation every day."

When asked about the state of animation in the world today, Catani remains quite optimistic. "Although it lives in the undergrowth of 'cinema,' animation remains a highly vibrant form of expression, and I believe it's still one of the most fertile grounds for technical, formal, and poetic experimentation in contemporary film," he says. "Animation continues to be a space for reflection, poetic language, and meaningful exploration — a space where we can resist the superficiality and banality imposed by dominant political and economic systems."

Pinocchio's new puppet master leaves us with these words. "I'm not really in a position to give advice to young artists, but if I had to share one suggestion, it would be this: Make animation only if it feels like a necessity — an urgent need that overrides everything else!" ■

"Animation continues to be a space for reflection, poetic language, and meaningful exploration — a space where we can resist the superficiality and banality imposed by dominant political and economic systems."

DIRECTOR ROBERTO CATANI

Leveling Up

How brothers Chris and Justin Copeland explored family ties and their love for gaming in the heart-warming *Wednesdays with Gramps*.

By Ramin Zahed

A teen gamer realizes that he and his elderly grandfather have a lot more in common than he imagined in the beautifully crafted DreamWorks short *Wednesdays with Gramp*, directed by brothers Chris and Justin Copeland and produced by Shabrayia Cleaver. The charming short, which has won several festival awards and qualified for Oscar consideration, has been in the works since early 2022.

"We were in development on a feature at the time, and DreamWorks thought that it would be a good idea for us to get to know the pipeline and some of the amazing artists that build our movies on a daily basis," recalls Chris. "We were invited to explore any idea that we wanted, within reason. After pitching a few ideas that we had laying around that didn't work, our fearless and amazing producer, Shabrayia Cleaver, asked us to think about the foundation of all good stories: relationships. We've never known our grandparents, and we had this wish fulfillment idea that they probably would have been gamers like us!"

The duo, who have worked as artists on a wide range of projects including *Invincible, Batman: Soul of the Dragon* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, discovered that the video game aspect of the short made it perfect for animation. "The emotional angle of the story came to us pretty early on and from there, it was all about making sure the rest of the piece built upon that foundation," says Chris. "Really though, this film belongs to our producer Shabrayia, as much as us. She brought us on and wouldn't take no for an answer! She also worked with us on our feature and knew which meetings we needed to be in, and which ones we didn't. She made the entire process easy and painless, which freed us to just create. She really is the MVP on this film!"

"Whenever we work on a film, we ask ourselves: what about this idea makes it work as an animated film? What separates it from a live-action piece? And that is where the video game aspects really came to life."
DIRECTORS CHRIS & JUSTIN COPELAND

The Copelands, who are currently working on a new project at LAIKA, pursued different paths to animation careers. "We were born in the early '80s and got to experience the dawn of anime, super hero films, comics and video games," says Justin. "Along with our older brother, we would both read comics and draw into the early morning hours." The goal for Justin was to direct live-action films, while Chris was fascinated by the visual appeal and the style of everything — from comic books, to video games to fine art, and of course, animation.

"We were really poor growing up in Chicago, and a movie camera or camcorder was out of the question," they recall. "An uncle of ours, who loved movies like us, would send us boxes of comics. He also sent *The Making of Batman* ('89) as well, and that was really eye opening! So, we read comics, built worlds with Legos and just started drawing — a lot!"

The talented siblings are also great graffiti artists and use the shapes and colors as a foundation in most of the art that they create. "We'd also spend months drawing comic pages and then travel the country to different conventions, trying to break into the comic industry," says Justin. "Luckily, we just couldn't get our feet into the 'comic-book' door. After a decade of trying, Chris was done. We were both married with young families and it just wasn't working. He decided to move to L.A. and try drawing in any other industry. Justin decided to give it one more year then maybe follow. Things changed for us both when Chris got a job at Warner Bros. Animation three days after moving to Burbank. Justin followed six months later, and we both began what's now been 16-year careers!"

The Copelands are very grateful that DreamWorks enabled them to build their short from the ground up. "They gave us a budget and any artists that were interested, and thankfully, there were a lot of folks that wanted to help us bring this idea to life!" notes Justin. "From the very beginning, Shabrayia leaned on this idea that we could really do a lot for our feature if we started with a short. We all gelled with the other team members as a family really quickly. We would joke and find creative ways to solve problems that would pop up."

Brothers in Art: Chris and Justin Copeland are huge fans of comic books, gaming and animation, and they used that passion as inspiration for their award-winning DreamWorks short *Wednesdays with Gramps*.

Of course, we had to find out if their family had seen their emotionally charged short!

"They have, and they all love it," says Chris. "Between the two of us, we have nine children (Justin has five, and Chris four) and they and our beautiful wives actually *really* love the short and that feels super nice. They've been such amazing supporters of our careers, so to make something that they *actually* love feels even more validating."

Ironically, the brothers have never met either of their grandfathers. "On one hand that's a sad reality," admits Chris. "But, on the other hand, it's actually what drives the 'wish fulfillment' of the movie. Justin and myself, with our other siblings, used to wonder what our grandparents were like, so we built this story with the thought of, 'What if we met him, and he was a gamer like us?' Honestly, that question and the desire to answer it with animated short film is what kept an emotional core active throughout the making of the film. In some meta way, this movie is a love letter to the grandfather and mother we never met." ■

A Cosmic Dance of Life

Disney veteran Malcon Pierce explores love, loss and resilience in the deeply personal short *Versa*.

By Ramin Zahed

Malcon Pierce, a longtime Disney animation veteran who has worked on *Wreck-It Ralph, Frozen, Big Hero 6* and *Moana,* uses his and his wife's personal experience to give flight to the poignant animated short *Versa*. In the powerful, expressionist work, a young couple go through a range of emotions — from grief and loss to joy and acceptance — as they embark on a cosmic dance of life together.

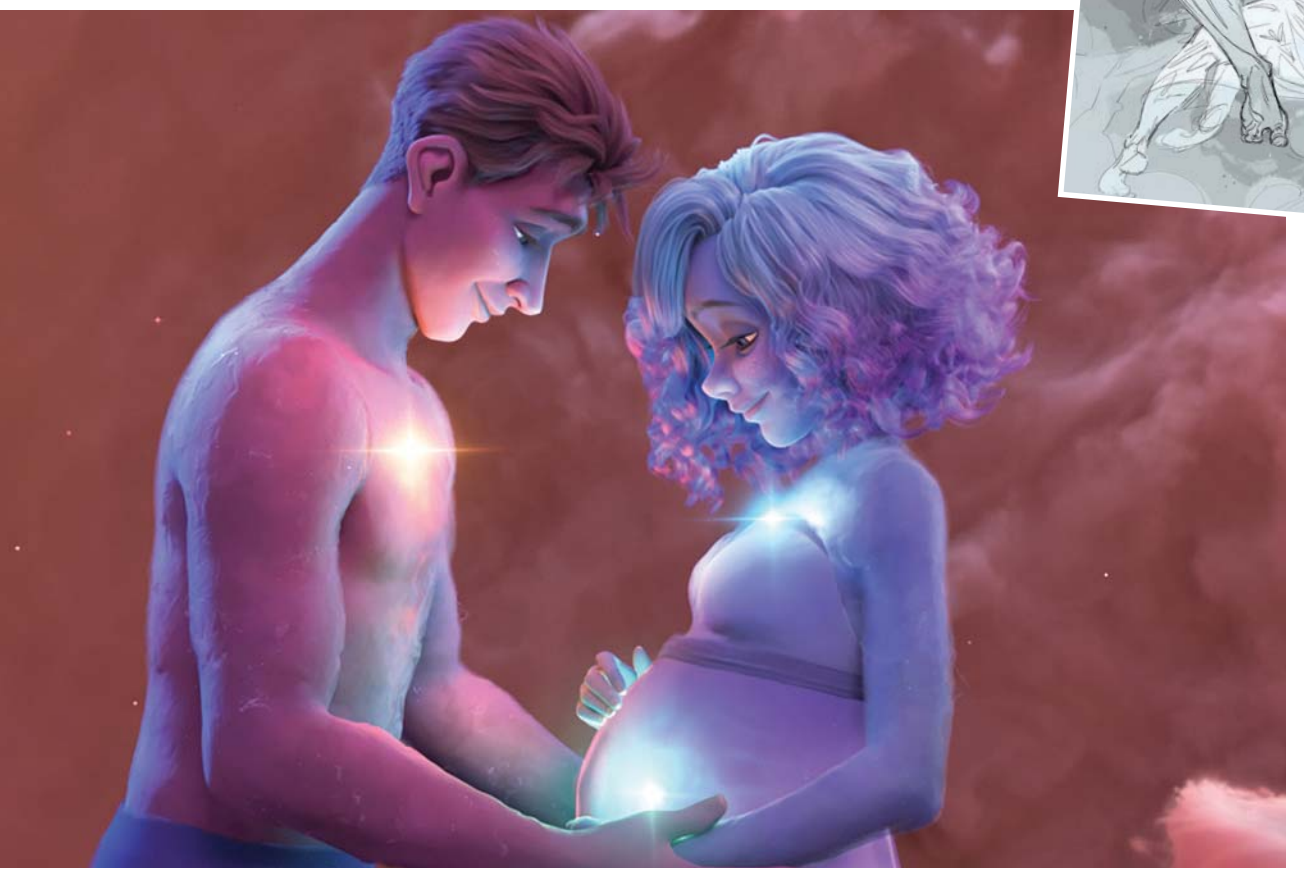
> **"Grief, I've learned, isn't something you finish — it's something you live with, a way to keep love present."**
> **DIRECTOR MALCON PIERCE**

"This short was inspired by the path my wife and I have walked together — through the deep grief of losing our son Cooper and the quiet, fierce love it takes to keep choosing each other through it all," says the director. "*Versa* began with the little star beside our son's name in the *Moana* credits. We lost him on his birthday as production started, an experience that reshaped my wife, Keely, and me completely. Grief, I've learned, isn't something you finish — it's something you live with, a way to keep love present. When we later welcomed our second child, Casper, we found that accepting the loss let us keep Cooper close. This film is my way of sharing that journey and the enduring power of love through loss."

A Universal Theme

The short's title, *Versa*, is a play on both "universe" and "vice versa," explains the director. "It reflects the constant shift between love and grief, how they orbit and transform each other. Even the [title] design carries meaning: The lowercase 'r' represents the child in the story, a quiet symbol of the connection that inspired the film.

Pierce began working on *Versa* near the end of 2016, sketching ideas and exploring movement while serving as head of animation on several Disney projects. "When we moved to Vancouver to help build the studio's second location, I became the studio artistic director," he recalls. "I officially began production on the short in 2023, and I'm so thankful for the incredible support that has kept the project moving forward all these years. From the official production start in 2023 to final delivery, it took about a year and a half. Around 150 artists contributed during production, and what I love about short films is that you can really get to know the crew on a personal level: It was such a joy to share the experience with everyone."



The labor of love was produced using Maya for animation and Houdini for effects. "Because the characters relied so heavily on integrated lighting and FX, our lighting, effects, modeling and look-dev teams had to work more closely than usual," Pierce explains. "Seeing everything combined early was essential for giving meaningful feedback on the characters, and that new level of collaboration was a really fun part of the process."

The filmmaker wanted the animation to be lyrical and expressive, and for the characters to have a big range in their performance. "We pushed the physicality with the ice-dance sequences and worked with an amazing husband-and-wife ice-dance choreography duo, Katherine Hill and Olympic silver medalist Ben Agosto, along with skater/cinematographer Jordan Cowan, who filmed on the ice to capture what it truly feels like to glide," says Pierce. "They really helped us push our animation and layout to feel true to ice dance, and they were so much fun to work with."

The director says he loved the fact that he was involved in everything about the short, from the earliest storyboards to the final lighting. "This made it profoundly personal," he notes. "It was humbling and I learned a lot. I think one of my greatest responsibilities was making sure the crew was having a great time and felt inspired to bring their best work forward, and I'm forever grateful for their artistry. Both incredibly rewarding and different."

Power of Love

As *Versa* premieres at various animation events and festivals around the world this year, Pierce is also busy co-directing an unannounced short. He's tight-lipped about the details, but he does tell us this: "This short revisits one of Disney's favorite characters, and I'll have to leave it at that for now!"

For now, Pierce is hoping his deeply personal artistic short leaves an impact on audiences. "I've thought a lot about this, because the film is different from what audiences might expect from Disney," he concludes. "I hope people feel the power of love and resilience — that even through loss there's a way to keep those we love close. Maybe it inspires a slightly longer 'goodnight' when the kids get tucked in, or an extra 'I love you' during a phone call with family. And I hope that anyone navigating these emotions can see themselves in our story and find hope and know that they're not alone." ■

Skating on Ice: The animation team pushed the physicality of the project with the ice-dance sequences and worked the husband-and-wife ice-dance choreography duo, Katherine Hill and Olympic silver medalist Ben Agosto, along with skater/cinematographer Jordan Cowan, who filmed on the ice to capture what it truly feels like to glide.

Flight From a Dark Past

Director Rand Beiruty follows up her acclaimed documentary *Tell Them About Us* with *Shadows*, a powerful short about a teenage mother fleeing a terrible life in Iraq.

By Ramin Zahed

A Resilient Presence: A 14-year-old runaway mother escapes the nightmares from her past life in Baghdad in Rand Beiruty's award-winning short, *Shadows*.

In the 2024 documentary *Tell Them About Us,* director Rand Beiruty followed the lives of teenage girls who fled Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Kurdistan and Romania to new homes in Germany. As she was researching that project, she met a teenage mom named Ahlam who left her home country of Iraq to begin a new life abroad. Her life story inspired *Shadows,* an acclaimed 2D-animated short which was nominated for top prizes at Annecy, Venice and Zagreb festivals this year.

"Ahlam was was 15 years old then when I met her in 2019, and telling her story on camera didn't feel right," Beiruty tells *Animation Magazine*. "She was in a vulnerable moment, but it was also clear that she wanted to speak. I found animation to be the most ethical and evocative way to bring her story to life, one that could hold both her vulnerability and her strength."

Beiruty says something about the young mother's presence and the way she spoke to the director stayed with her. "It made me feel that her story needed time and care to unfold," she explains. "I wrote a script and proposal and applied to Anidox in Denmark and the Animation du Monde workshop in Lebanon. Being selected to both was encouraging, and at Animation du Monde the project won an award and received an invitation to pitch at Mifa during the Annecy Film Festival."

Because of the COVID pandemic, Annecy was virtual that year. "It was disappointing to miss the in-person exchange, but that moment also shaped the project," the director recalls. "We managed to connect with our French co-producer, which gave the film new momentum and a clearer path forward. With our talented creative team and our great producers, we secured the necessary support, and production took place in the first half of 2024 at the Ciclic Animation residency in France. We received the news of our selection to Venice even before starting post-production, which was a wonderful surprise. So while development and financing took a couple of years, the production and post-production phases were incredibly focused and a lot of fun!"

The visual style of *Shadows* is meant to immerse the audience in Ahlam's inner world. "The animation creates a parallel universe where the realistic setting of an airport is intertwined with fantastical elements that reflect her emotions, memories and fears," the director notes. "The color palette is bold, creating a contrast to the harshness of the story and reminding us that the person speaking is still a child. I am grateful to every member of the creative team who contributed to the film's final look. In particular, I feel very fortunate to have collaborated with the Polish artist and animator Marta Magnuska, who brought a distinctive sensibility of style and perspective that shaped the visual language of the film in essential ways."

Style at Service of Substance

The director says she's interested in animators who use form and style to serve the story they are telling. "Every choice in animation can add emotional weight and shape how we experience the world of the story," she explains. "One short that has stayed with me for years is *Zepo* by César Díaz Meléndez. Its sand-on-glass animation is not just a visual choice, the shifting grains become part of the narrative's tension and fragility. The stark contrast of dark and light gives the snowy setting a haunting feeling, and the technique makes the violence feel raw and inevitable. Watching shorts at festivals always inspires me. It reminds me how many possibilities there are within animation and keeps me curious and engaged, always searching for the visual language that best carries each story."

"Animation can soften the edges of very difficult topics, making them easier for audiences to face without losing their weight. That combination of protection, imagination, and emotional depth is why animation felt like the right choice for *Shadows*."

DIRECTOR RAND BEIRUTY

Beiruty also believes that animation allows the artist to make subtle statements about important issues such as the plight of immigrants all over the world. "When talking about migration, there is often so much noise, with headlines, statistics and politics making it easy to lose sight of the individual experience," she says. "Animation strips that noise away and allows us to focus on the emotions at the heart of the story. It allows us to stay with the individual's subjectivity, their memories and their emotional landscapes."

She hopes after seeing her short, audiences will remember and admire Ahlam's courage and determination. "If someone watching the short is going through a difficult moment, I hope her story gives them the feeling that they are not alone and that they too can keep going," says Beiruty. "I also hope it encourages audiences to listen more deeply to voices like Ahlam's and to recognize the power and insight young people can bring when they are heard." ■

For more info, visit randbeiruty.com.

Brief Encounter

French director Pierre-Luc Granjon looks back at the making of his charming Annecy Prize-winning short, *The Night Boots*.

By Ramin Zahed

Earlier this year, French writer-director Pierre-Luc Granjon (*The White Wolf*, co-director on the 2023 feature *The Inventor*) took home the short film Cristal at Annecy for his beautiful and thought-provoking film *The Night Boots* (*Les bottes de la nuit*). The black-and-white short, which centers on the friendship between a young boy and a strange creature he meets in the forest, was made using the pinscreen method (first invented by Alexandre Alexeieff and his wife Claire Parker in their studio in Paris in 1932) using a side-lit screen filled with movable pins.

started in March 2023 and ended one year later. The film was completely finished a few months after.

The director opted to use a classic pinscreen (l'epinette), a metallic frame in which 277,00 white tube are stuck. In each tube, there is a pin, 5mm longer than the tube. When all the pins are pushed inside, one can see the cut of the tubes, and the screen is white. When pins get out, they project a shadow on the surface (only one projector was used to light the pinscreen) and these shadows create different greys,and black.

"I decided to use the pinscreen because I felt it was the right tool for my project, which is set on a night of full moon in the countryside," Granjon explains. "When I draw on a pinscreen, I have the feeling of sculpting the light and the shadow (the chiaroscuro). When all the pins are out, the screen is black (it looks like a black velvet). I use little tools in glass (a pointy bulb could work) and when I pass it on the screen, the light appears, it's a kind of magic!"

"I started it with the shot of the boots on the corridor, with the shadow of Eliot," he adds. "Then, I decided to keep on with the next shot, following Eliot in his room, then in the forest. In a way, I was following the same adventure as Eliot, discovering for each shot what the pinscreen could propose and offer me. Of course, the pinscreen needs to be in a dark room, with only one projector. To be in that kind of cave for 12 months was not the most pleasant. I had to go out regularly, to enjoy the light, and look at the horizon."

"My advice for young animators is to keep in mind why they chose animation: pleasure, excitement, passion for an art that combines narration, visuals, movements, sound and music. The industry can be very harsh and heartless, and if that's the case, then run!"

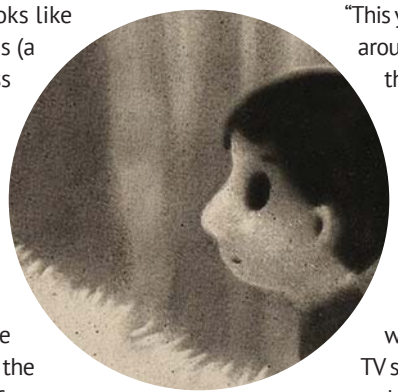
DIRECTOR PIERRE-LUC GRANJON

"When I started writing *The Night Boots*, the world news was very dark — it hasn't got better since — and I didn't want to add darkness to it," says Granjon. "It is important to keep tenderness alive even when so many things seem to be going the wrong way."

The French director says he had two specific images in his head: a child stepping outside his house at night, while his parents had guests, and the second was the same boy getting home two or three hours later. "These two scenes would be the beginning and the end of the movie," he recalls. "I had to imagine what happened in between. I am also inspired by many different directors like Yuri Norstein, Jérémy Clapin, Suzie Templeton, Miyazaki, Greco/Buffat … I really enjoy the work of many directors."

Pins and Needles

Granjon originally wrote the short and drew the storyboard in 2019, just before co-directing Jim Capobianco's *The Inventor* for more than two years. *The Night Boots'* production



Looking back, Granjon says the creation of the short ended up being a labor-intensive but wonderful adventure, thanks to all the people he collaborated with. "First, my producer, Yves Bouveret (Am Stram Gram), who tried to be the cloud gobbler of my film, trying to keep the sky clear above my head during all the process!" he says. "I also think of Loïck Burkhardt, the sound designer. We worked together for several weeks, giving life to the forest and its different creatures. And there is also Timothée Jolly, my musician, and Cédric Lionnet, the film mixer, and Bernard Bouillon (the voice of the creature), and so many others — Brieuc Laudet, Antoine Rodet, Xavier Drouault, Sara Sponga, Christophe Gautry, Eymeric Jorat."

When asked about the impact of his work, Granjon says he wanted the film to be tender, and to make the audience feel that. "The core of the film is this encounter between the boy and the creature, two solitary beings, and the birth of a friendship," he notes. "There is no antagonism in the movie, which is another important point for me. Most monsters are no longer monsters once you know them: It is ignorance that creates them."

"This year in Annecy, I saw many movies from all around the world," Granjon mentions. "I know that it's often said that there is a crisis in animation — well, that is said in France anyway. That is certainly true about the animated series industry, but when we talk about shorts and features, it is amazing how rich and diverse the productions are. My worries are more about AI, but I know that part of the audience will always appreciate movies, shorts and TV shows made by humans. Perhaps we need a new label: 100% human-made." ■

Visit cnc.fr and unifrance.org for more information on *The Night Boots*.

A Little Night Magic: A young boy meets a strange creature in the woods one night in Pierre-Luc Granjon's lyrical Annecy Cristal-winning short, *The Night Boots*.

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IN THEATRES 2026

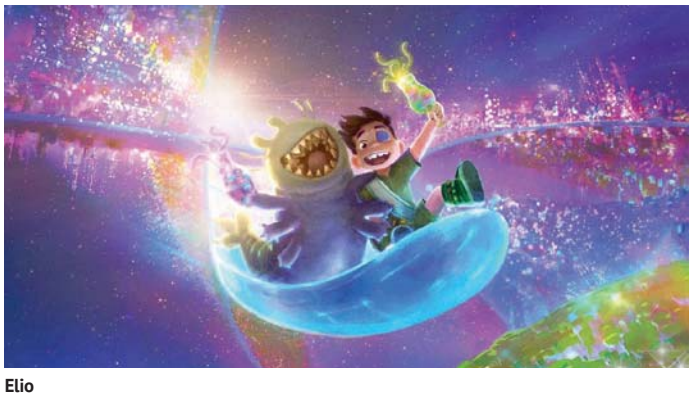
YOUR 2026 ANIMATED FEATURE OSCAR DOSSIER

By Michael Mallory • With no clear front-runners — certainly not like last year's slate, which was essentially a two-picture race between *The Wild Robot* and *Flow* — the 2026 Best Animated Feature Oscar is literally up for grabs. Vying for gold are highly polished Hollywood sequels and franchise faves; action-jammed Asian spectacles; thoughtful European examinations of life; and a handful of indies, some faith-based. While handicapping is somewhat hindered by having so many late-year releases that are unavailable to review, here are the best bets.

TOP CONTENDERS

Arco

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba — Infinity Castle



Elio

Arco

Director: Ugo Bienvenu
Released by: Neon
Production Studios: Fit Via Vi Film Productions, MountainA, Remembers
Cast: Oscar Tresanini, Margot Ringard, Alma Jodorowsky (French); Natalie Portman, Will Ferrell, America Ferrera (English)
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 89%
Synopsis: In a reality where rainbows are time travelers from the future, a too-young-for-travel boy goes on a time adventure anyway to save the world to come.
Release Date: Oct. 22, 2025 (France); Nov. 14, 2025 (U.S.)
Director's Quote: "This was the project to make a big hug to everybody and say if we trust imagination, and emotions, I believe it's the only way to stay human."
The Word: "The film aims to inspire action and stave off despair with a reminder that the most powerful tool younger generations can wield is their imagination." — Lovia Gyarkye, *The Hollywood Reporter*
Chances: Good; elegant graphics and creative storytelling combine to push all the right Oscar buttons.

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba — Infinity Castle

Directors: Haruo Sotozaki, Hikaru Kondô
Released by: Crunchyroll/Sony Pictures Ent.
Production Studio: Ufotable
Cast: Natsuki Hanae, Akari Kitō, Yoshitsugu Matsuoka
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 98%
Synopsis: The Demon Slayers and Upper Rank Demons battle it out in Infinity Castle.
Release Date: July 18, 2025 (Japan); Sept. 11, 2025 (U.S.)
Box Office: $659.2 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "This is going to be the first time that audiences are going to see all the dynamic movement from the characters within the Infinity Castle." — Haruo Sotozaki
The Word: "While the plot is simple, the visual imagery and the emotions are complex." — G. Allen Johnson, *San Francisco Chronicle*
Chances: Decent; while installments of long-running, manga-based franchises traditionally have not broken through the Oscar barrier, this commercial and critical juggernaut just might.

Elio

Directors: Madeline Sharafian, Domee Shi, Adrian Molina
Released by: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures
Production Studio: Pixar Animation Studios
Cast: Yonas Kibreab, Zoe Saldaña, Remy Edgerly
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 83%
Synopsis: A young boy obsessed with space and aliens gets to meet a few when he's beamed up to an intergalactic U.N., faces crises and ultimately discovers himself.
Release Date: June 20, 2025
Box Office: $154 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "I was a lonely weirdo who had trouble connecting with others, and my hope is that this movie inspires other lonely weirdos out there to find each other." — Domee Shi

Nominations voting for the 98th Academy Awards is open to academy members from Jan. 12 to Jan. 16, 2026. Nominees will be announced on Jan. 22. Visit our website daily for regular reports on the animation awards season! (animationmagazine.net)

The Word: "What's frustrating is that it comes so close to greatness, or at least really goodness." — Kristian M. Lin, *Fort Worth Weekly.*
Chances: More likely than not. While the Pixar imprimatur is no longer a sure bet for Oscar recognition, it carries a lot of weight.

In Your Dreams

Director: Alex Woo
Released by: Netflix
Production Studios: Netflix Animation, Kuku Studios
Cast: Jolie Hoang-Rappaport, Elias Janssen, Craig Robinson
Synopsis: Two young siblings journey to the land of dreams to ask the Sandman to help solve their family problems.
Release Date: Nov. 7, 2025
Director's Quote: "Dreams have always fascinated me, and a dream movie, in the animated space, has been a 'white whale.'"
Chances: Even before its release, the buzz about this visually stunning, Pixar-esque adventure has elevated its chances.

KPop Demon Hunters

Directors: Maggie Kang, Chris Appelhans
Released by: Netflix
Production Studio: Sony Pictures Animation
Cast: Arden Cho, Ahn Hyo-seop, May Hong
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 95%
Synopsis: As if staying together as a band isn't hard enough, a girl group of secret demon hunters faces off against demons that are disguised as a boy band to prey on pop fans.
Release Date: June 20, 2025
Box Office: $18 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "As an industry, we really should not underestimate our young viewers. They are so insightful and they want deeper stories. They don't want to be treated like children." — Maggie Kang
The Word: "Probably the year's funniest animated feature from the interactions of the three distinct personalities of our heroines to the portrayal of over-the-top fandom." — Alonso Duralde, *The Film Verdict*
Chances: Very high — the movie that was on every pop culture meter this year, became Netflix's most popular title of all time, broke numerous *Billboard* and Spotify records with its catchy tunes and became a sing-along sensation cannot be ignored by the academy.

Little Amélie or the Character of Rain

Directors: Maïlys Vallade, Liane-Cho Han
Released by: GKIDS
Production Studios: Maybe Movies, Ikki Films
Cast: Loïse Charpentier, Victoria Grosbois, Yumi Fujimori
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 93%
Synopsis: A 3-year-old Belgian girl in Japan explores the mysteries of the world and existence with her family housekeeper.
Release Date: June 25, 2025 (France); Oct. 31, 2025 (U.S.)
Box Office: $1.53 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "One of the topics of the movie is the transition between early and later childhood … we forget about the moment when kids believe they're the center of the universe and then realize they're not." — Liane-Cho Han
The Word: "Visually engrossing and thought-provoking fare that ranges daringly across emotions ranging from pure delight to fear and horror." — Jonathan Holland, *Screen International*
Chances: Decent chances for the category's European film slot.

Zootopia 2

Directors: Jared Bush, Byron Howard
Released by: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures
Production Studio: Walt Disney Animation Studios
Cast: Ginnifer Goodwin, Jason Bateman, Idris Elba
Synopsis: Zootopia cop team Judy and Nick track a mysterious snake that has made its way into the mammalian metropolis.
Release Date: Nov. 26, 2025
Director's Quote: "Sequels are tricky. Audiences want familiarity but also expect growth. The key is making sure any evolution feels organic and integral to the story." — Jared Bush
Chances: Yet to be seen, it's hard to predict its prospects. But given its pedigree, it's also hard to deny it a chance. The first movie was a huge hit ($1.042 billion at the worldwide box office) and won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature in 2017.

In Your Dreams

Kpop Demon Hunters

Little Amélie or the Character of Rain

Zootopia 2

OTHER POSSIBILITIES

A Magnificent Life (Marcel et Monsieur Pagnol)

Director: Sylvain Chomet
Released by: Wild Bunch (France), Sony Pictures Classics (U.S.)
Production Studios: What the Prod, Mediawan, Bidibul Productions, Walking the Dog
Cast: Laurent Lafitte, Géraldine Pailhas
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 83%
Synopsis: Legendary French writer and filmmaker Marcel Pagnol goes down memory lane with the help of his younger self.
Release Date: Oct. 15, 2025 (France), fourth quarter (U.S.)
Director's Quote: "It wasn't supposed to be an animation at all! But I animated just one scene and suddenly everyone says, 'There are already [live-action] documentaries on Pagnol. We want the animation.'"
The Word: "No one who's fallen for the timeless and charmingly antic worlds of Sylvain Chomet will be disappointed by this poignant eulogy to

A Magnificent Life (Marcel et Monsieur Pagnol)

The Bad Guys 2

ChaO

Dandelion's Odyssey

Death Does Not Exist

Decorado

one of France's great, if now decidedly uncool, 20th century artists." — Philip de Semlyen, *Time Out*
Chances: Iffy, since animated biopics have almost never been recognized, but not impossible. Plus, the overall response at Annecy was lukewarm.

The Bad Guys 2

Director: Pierre Perifel
Released by: Universal Pictures
Production Studio: DreamWorks Animation
Cast: Sam Rockwell, Marc Maron, Awkwafina
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 88%
Synopsis: Attempting to reform, the animal criminal band known as the Bad Guys are drawn into a new heist plot by a trio of female miscreants.
Release Date: Aug. 1, 2025
Box Office: $216 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "In the second one, it's all about pushing the limits and pushing the camerawork and pushing the scope of everything … and then reshaping the characters a little bit."
The Word: "*The Bad Guys 2* is an animated family film that makes an effort to truly appeal to multiple demographics." — Kaitlyn Booth, *Bleeding Cool*
Chances: The jury's out. The second outing for the delightful criminals was a crowd-and-critic pleaser, but it's tough to say whether it will nab a nomination.

ChaO

Director: Yasuhiro Aoki
Released by: Toei Company (Japan), GKIDS (U.S.)
Production Studio: Studio 4°C
Cast: Ouji Suzuka, Anna Yamada, Yūichirō Umehara
Synopsis: A rom-com between a young man and a mermaid princess.
Release Date: Aug. 15, 2025 (Japan); TBA (U.S.)
Director's Quote: "We wanted to capture a mixture of manga and fantasy. It was challenging to create something that at first glance doesn't cohere but doesn't feel strange or uncomfortable."
The Word: "Visually spectacular and energetic in style, this is a bracingly anarchic piece of storytelling that announces a distinctive new voice in Japanese anime." — Wendy Ide, *Screen International*
Chances: Possible, given its unique take on traditional anime, but limited visibility in America and bigger competition from other anime imports might hurt its chances.

Dandelion's Odyssey

Director: Momoko Seto
Released by: Gebeka Films (France)
Production Studios: Arte France Cinéma, Ecce Films, Umedia
Cast: None (no dialog)
Synopsis: Nuclear explosions blast four dandelion achenes (one-seeded fruit) from Earth to a distant planet, where they struggle to find adequate soil in which to survive.
Release Date: May 21, 2025 (France)
Director's Quote: "Emotion is truly the key. It was essential that the four achenes convey their emotions in every situation."
The Word: "Another great example of the emotional power and boundless creativity animated films can have when people start thinking outside the box." — Andrew Parker, *The Gate*
Chances: The movie is considered the spiritual successor to last year's *Flow*, but it lacks the broader appeal and visibility of Gints Zilbalodis' cat epic.

Death Does Not Exist (La mort n'existe pas)

Director: Félix Dufour-Laperrière
Production Studios: Embuscade Films, Miyu Productions
Cast: Karelle Tremblay, Barbara Ulrich, Zeneb Blanchet
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 78%
Synopsis: After an attack against a rich capitalist fails, an activist flees to the forest, where the ghost of a former colleague forces her to reevaluate her life and convictions.
Release Date: May 15, 2025 (Cannes Film Festival)
Director's Quote: "I wanted the lead character, Manon, to recognize something of herself in the older woman who's the cell's ultimate target. That's what makes her impossible to shoot."
The Word: "Even when the presentation is simple, it carries a quietly poetic power." — Chase Hutchinson, *The Wrap*
Chances: Fair on its merits, but it must receive distribution. Also, it should be noted that the cerebral, 2D-animated film won the top feature prize at both the Annecy and Ottawa festivals this year.

Decorado

Director: Alberto Vázquez
Released by: Barton Films (Spain)
Production Studios: Albano Productions, UniKo Estudio Creativo, Glow Animation
Synopsis: A mouse named Arnold has an existential crisis.
Release Date: Oct. 24, 2025 (Spain)
Director's Quote: "What I do a little bit is work with anthropomorphic animals. They are very universal, and everyone understands them. It does not matter what country you are from." — Alberto Vázquez
Chances: The animation and comic-book community loves the work of the Spanish auteur (*Unicorn Wars, Birdboy: The Forgotten Children*), but Oscar chances might be a longshot, although not out of the question.

Dog Man

Director: Peter Hastings
Released by: Universal Pictures
Production Studio: DreamWorks Animation
Cast: Pete Davidson, Lil Rel Howery, Isla Fisher
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 81%
Synopsis: A cop and his dog become one surgically joined entity and struggle to thwart the evil schemes of a more powerful cat/human villain.
Release Date: Jan. 31, 2025
Box Office: $146 million
Director's Quote: "You read the [Dav Pilkey source] books and you're like, 'Oh, this is just this goofy

little book,' and then you get to some of these emotional stories and you're like 'Wow!'"
The Word: "It's all very, very silly. That, combined with the relentless pace, should ensure that it delights its target audience of undertens." — Helen O'Hara, *Empire Magazine*
Chances: Slim. A winner for the *Captain Underpants* set, but Oscar doesn't wear underpants.

Scarlet

Director: Mamoru Hosada
Released by: Sony Pictures Classics (U.S.)
Production Studios: Columbia Pictures, Hakuhodo, Studio Chizu
Cast: Mana Ashida, Masaki Okada, Masachika Ichimura
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 85%
Synopsis: A princess stuck between life and death seeks to avenge her father's murder and meets a young man who attempts to teach her life is more "can-do" than "kendo."
Release Date: Dec. 12, 2025
Director's Quote: "Simply put, this is a story of vengeance."
The Word: "Fans of the director's earlier fantasias are likely to be appeased, but others may find this a bit of a trial." — James Mottram, *South China Morning Post*
Chances: Frankly, *Scarlet*, Oscar voters *might* give a damn, making a nom possible.

The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants

Director: Derek Drymon
Released by: Paramount Pictures
Production Studios: Paramount Animation, Nickelodeon Movies
Cast: Tom Kenny, Rodger Bumpass, Clancy Brown, Bill Fagerbakke, Mark Hamill
Synopsis: To try and prove his bravery, SpongeBob (with the help of his gang) travels the depths of the ocean to find the ghost of the legendary Flying Dutchman.
Release Date: Dec. 19, 2025
Director's Quote: "This is a movie you come to where you really can laugh, and you can enjoy it. What we stressed was just the fun and the silliness."
Chances: Everyone loves SpongeBob, though it's fair to say that this entry in the ubiquitous franchise may not automatically pan the ocean for Oscar gold. (The studio had not screened the movie for the trade at press time.)

Dog Man

Scarlet

The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants

Animal Farm

Director: Andy Serkis
Production Studios: Aniventure, Cinesite, Imaginarium Productions
Cast: Steve Buscemi, Seth Rogen, Woody Harrelson, Kathleen Turner
Synopsis: Based on the classic Orwell novel in which farm animals rebel against authority and take over the farm.
Release Date: June 25, 2025 (Annecy International Animation Film Festival)
Director's Quote: "We started years before some of these events occurred [in real life]. There are enough despots around the world using the same divisive techniques to control people."
The Word: "This gorgeously animated version is not outwardly trying to be political but nevertheless is uncannily meeting its time." — Pete Hammond, *Deadline*
Chances: As a striking animated adaptation of classic literature, very possible. Whether its political overcoat will weigh its chances one way or the other is the question. Also, the early reviews on the film's overall animation were not kind.

Fixed

Director: Genndy Tartakovsky
Released by: Netflix
Production Studio: Sony Pictures Animation
Cast: Adam DeVine, Idris Elba, Kathryn Hahn
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 56%
Synopsis: Right before being neutered by his owners, a relentlessly horny dog is taken on a wild "bachelor party" evening by his friends.
Release Date: Aug. 13, 2025
Director's Quote: "Hand-drawn animation just gives you one more step of removal from the buttholes and the balls and anything gross. It still has a little appeal or charm to it."
The Word: "The best thing about *Fixed* is the expressive animation, even when what's being expressed is Bull's talking genitals." — Brian Tallerico, *RogerEbert.com*
Chances: Despite its engaging 2D animation, this brave poke at R-rated tooning will likely appeal only to academy voters who thought *American Pie* was robbed.

Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie

Director: Ryan Crego
Released by: Universal Pictures
Production Studio: DreamWorks Animation
Cast: Laila Lockhart Kraner, Kristen Wiig, Thomas Lennon, Jason Mantzoukas
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 81%
Synopsis: Teenage cat fancier Gabby struggles to retrieve her prized dollhouse, which has been stolen by a crazy cat lady.
Release Date: Sept. 26, 2025
Box Office: $20 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "On the show, Gabby looks right down

Animal Farm

Fixed

Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie

Grand Prix of Europe

The King of Kings

Light of the World

Olivia and the Invisible Earthquake

Smurfs

the pipe of the camera and asks the audience to get involved. I wanted to find a way to do that in theaters, but not necessarily at a preschool level."
The Word: "Songs and jokes and a surprisingly psychedelic sensibility make for a safe, kooky and sometimes even adult-amusing good time." — Bob Strauss, *San Francisco Chronicle*
Chances: This animation/live-action hybrid based on the preschool TV series might serve to test the limits of what Oscar considers an animated feature, but probably not enough for a nomination.

Grand Prix of Europe

Director: Waldemar Fast
Released by: Viva Kids (U.S.)
Production Studios: Mack Magic, Warner Bros. Film Productions Germany
Cast: Gemma Arterton, Thomas Brodie-Sangster, Hayley Atwell
Synopsis: A little girl mouse dreams of being a racecar driver like her hero, and after she inadvertently injures him while joyriding, she takes his place in the race.
Release Date: July 18, 2025 (Romania); Nov. 7, 2025 (U.S.)
Box Office: $7.5 million
The Word: "It's a perfectly serviceable plotline, and unlike so many animated films for under-eights, with their needlessly complicated stories, it even makes sense." — Cath Clark, *Guardian*
Chances: While the film is cute and innocuous, Oscar is one race this won't win.

The King of Kings

Director: Seong-ho Jang
Released by: Angel Studios
Production Studio: Mofac Studios
Cast: Kenneth Branagh, Uma Thurman, Mark Hamill, Pierce Brosnan
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 62%
Synopsis: Charles Dickens tells the story of Jesus to his rambunctious son.
Release Date: April 11, 2025
Box Office: $78 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "The life of Jesus is known to a lot of people, whether they are religious or not religious, so I thought it was meaningless to repeat that process."
The Word: "While this certainly isn't for everyone, *The King of Kings* has its own kind of mass appeal." — Matthew Briody, *Film Ireland Magazine*
Chances: Low; one of two Gospel-inspired films this year, and despite its earnestness and a truly stellar voice cast, its makers shouldn't expect a miracle.

Light of the World

Directors: Tom Bancroft, John J. Schafer
Released by: The Salvation Poem Project
Production Studios: The Salvation Poem Project, Lighthouse Studios
Cast: Ian Hanlin, Benjamin Jacobson, Vincent Tong
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 85%
Synopsis: The story of Jesus' life as seen through the eyes of the apostle John.
Release Date: Sept. 5, 2025
Box Office: $5.1 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "Much like the films I worked on in the '90s for Disney, where [youngsters] needed to leave the family and go off on an adventure, and that's what happened Biblically, too." — Tom Bancroft
The Word: "Despite the fact this production is hand-drawn 2D animation, every character has more depth than a lot of the live-action versions." — Rick Bentley, *KGET-TV*
Chances: Low. Despite its assets, this year's second coming of the Jesus story in animation is more likely cancel out with *King of Kings*.

Olivia and the Invisible Earthquake

Director: Irene Iborra Rizo
Released by: Filmfax (Spain)
Production Studios: Bigaro Films, Citoplasmas Stop Motion Studios, Cornelius Films
Cast: Emma Suárez, Elvira Mínguez, Sally Jatta
Synopsis: Young Olivia creates an alternate cinematic reality to push back against the harshness of reality affecting her and her younger brother.
Release Date: Nov. 21, 2025 (Spain)
Director's Quote: "We wanted to tackle difficult topics in a luminous, gentle way, making them visually pleasant."
The Word: "It is a tricky balance to tackle weighty subjects such as mental health and housing insecurity while also creating a work that is empathetic, joyful and child-friendly. Yet Irene Iborra Rizo's gorgeous Barcelona-set stop-motion animation achieves all of this, and more." — *Screen International*
Chances: Despite good festival buzz, it's too early to predict for the Oscars, and the stop-motion pic doesn't have a U.S. distributor yet.

Smurfs

Director: Chris Miller
Released by: Paramount Pictures
Production Studio: Paramount Animation
Cast: Rihanna, James Corden, Nick Offerman
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 21%
Synopsis: A Smurf with no name wanders into Smurf Village and displays uncanny powers, which results in a portal opening up and Papa Smurf being kidnapped, leading others on a rescue mission.
Release Date: July 18, 2025
Box Office: $121 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "I wanted to make a Smurfs movie look like the comics, have the DNA of the comics, but in a more immersive, dimensional world."
The Word: "There's nothing smurfy about *Smurfs*." — Sara Michelle Fetters, *MovieFreak.com*
Chances: Few things in life are guaranteed, though

Stitch Head

The Twits

this being ignored by Oscar is as close as it gets.

Stitch Head

Directors: Steve Hudson, Toby Genkel
Released by: Wild Bunch (Europe); Briarcliff Entertainment (U.S.)
Production Studios: Gringo Films, Fabrique d'Images
Cast: Asa Butterfield, Joel Fry, Tia Bannon
Synopsis: An experimental, overlooked "monster" created by a mad scientist is recruited by a ragtag freak show.
Release Date: Oct. 15, 2025 (Germany); Oct. 16, 2025 (U.S.)
The Word: "Ultimately, *Stitch Head* doesn't bring anything radically new to the table, but it delivers exactly what it sets out to: a light-hearted, visually engaging, and emotionally resonant story about being different." — Davide Abbatescianni, *Cineuropa*
Chances: Unlikely, but weirder things have happened.

The Twits

Director: Phil Johnston
Released by: Netflix
Production Studios: Netflix Animation, Jellyfish Pictures
Cast: Margo Martindale, Natalie Portman, Johnny Vegas
Synopsis: Two orphans and their animal pals fight to save their town from the clutches of a horrible couple who own an equally horrible amusement park.
Release Date: Oct. 17, 2025
Director's Quote: "The comedy in [Roald] Dahl's books is often mean, and the world is bad to children, so you learn resilience and fighting. This story, especially, is just naughty, and I felt it uses these two people to tell a strange, grotesque story, which is oddly enough appropriate for today's world."
Chances: Too early to predict, though its under-the-radar presence, particularly given its creative pedigree, implies trouble in Twitlandia.

Last-Minute Surprises

Every year, there are some international or indie titles which are not on everyone's radar but manage to pop up during the last two months of eligibility. Some of our favorites include Raitis Abele and Lauris Abele's ***Dog of God,*** which is Latvia's official entry in the international feature race; directors David Súkup, Patrik Pašš, Leon Vidmar & Jean-Claude Rozec's stop-motion anthology ***Tales from the Magic Garden*** (from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, France); and Roy and Arturo Ambriz's unforgettable ***I Am Frankelda***, from the talented team of magicians at Mexico's Cinema Fantasma. Everyone loves an underdog contender that manages to catch up with the big guys in the final lap!

INBETWEENS by: Bob Harper
"I'd like to thank the executives in attendance... And now that I have your attention, here's my preschool series pitch!""
Bob Harper

HUGE IN ASIA

While anime has developed a fairly wide cinematic following in the U.S., the demon-haunted, manga-based epic franchises have not and are still relegated to a narrower American fan base. These films, however, were hugely successful in Asia.

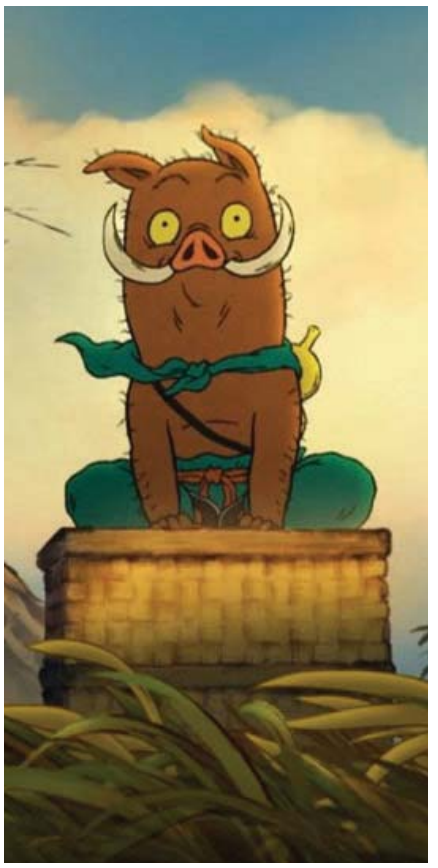
Ne Zha 2

Director: Yu Yang
Released by: Beijing Enlight Pictures
Production Studios: Chengdu Coco Cartoon, Beijing Enlight Pictures
Cast: Lü Yanting, Han Mo, Lu Qi (China); Crystal Lee, Aleks Le, Michelle Yeoh (English)
Rotten Tomatoes Score: 91%
Synopsis: The souls of legendary Chinese figures are spared when a calamity destroys their bodies, leading to a dangerous attempt to rebuild their physical forms.
Release Date: Jan. 29, 2025 (China); Aug. 22, 2025 (U.S.)
Box Office: $2.2 billion (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "The prequel was a big surprise to the audience, because they had no expectation for it, but *Ne Zha 2* was produced amid rising expectation, which put us under pressure and kept pushing us forward."
The Word: "Those not addicted to mythological fantasy will have a harder time. Nonetheless, there's plenty to appreciate, especially the massively scaled, spectacular visuals." — Frank Scheck, *The Hollywood Reporter*
Chances: Fair, despite being more successful on a global basis than in America.

Nobody

Director: Shi Yu
Released by: Huaxia Film Distribution (China)
Production Studio: Shanghai Animation Film Studio
Cast: Ziping Chen, Yang Lu, Wenliang Dong
Synopsis: A ragtag crew consisting of a pig, a toad, a weasel and an ape, disguised as characters from the Ming Dynasty-era novel *Journey to the West*, seeks immortality and ends up protecting a village.
Release Date: Aug. 2, 2025 (China)
Box Office: $86 million (China)
Director's Quote: "We have seen our works be continuously accepted overseas. I'm confident that in the near future, more Chinese films will achieve global recognition."
The Word: "Beyond its powerful narrative, *Nobody* is a breathtaking visual love letter to Chinese artistic heritage." — Chen Xi, *Global Times*
Chances: Not impossible, but slim.

Ne Zha 2



Nobody

Detective Conan: One-Eyed Flashback

Detective Conan: One-Eyed Flashback

Director: Katsuya Shigehara
Released by: Toho
Production Studio: TMS/1st Studio
Cast: Minami Takayama, Wakana Yamazaki, Rikiya Koyama
Synopsis: Optically injured Inspector Yamoto Kansuke and Detective Conan Edogawa investigate the killing of a police officer.
Release Date: April 18, 2025 (Japan); Sept. 26, 2025 (U.K.)
Box Office: $105 million (worldwide)
Director's Quote: Not available
The Word: "It is a very entertaining case, which perfectly demonstrates how anime has been able to catch up with the passing of the years and new technologies." — Mariló Delgado, *Espinof*
Chances: Virtually none; while anime has a fair track record with Oscar, long-running manga franchises do not.

Mononoke the Movie — Chapter II: The Ashes of Rage

Mononoke the Movie — Chapter II: The Ashes of Rage

Directors: Kenji Nakamura, Kiyotaka Suzuki
Released by: Giggly Box (Japan); Netflix (U.S. streaming)
Production Studios: EOTA, Crew-Cell
Cast: Hiroshi Kamiya, Haruka Tomatsu, Tomoyo Kurosawa
Synopsis: Friction in the imperial harem leads to trouble.
Release Date: March 14, 2025 (Japan); Aug. 14, 2025 (U.S. streaming)
Box Office: $660,000 (worldwide)
Director's Quote: "I want to create something that will not deteriorate with the times, so I place more importance on universality than on the direction of trends." — Kenji Nakamura
The Word: "*The Ashes of Rage* is accessible, yet the themes of darkness, death, political intrigue, power struggles and a jealousy so hot it literally burns all culminate in something truley layered and complex." — Maddy Casale, *Decider*
Chances: Slim-to-none, given its nontheatrical presence in America.

MITA
VOCALS
GUITAR

BEAT
DRUMS

ZIZI
BASS

HI
GUITARS

JANGMI
KEYBOARD

GHOST BAND

A phantasmal band becomes a real star.

CG Animated Feature
75 minutes | **Family**
Comic Drama**, Music**

jarin@goldframe.tv
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AN EARLY GUIDE TO THE YEAR'S OSCAR-QUALIFIED ANIMATED SHORTS

Dossier compiled by Jason Sanchez • Every day, new animated shorts qualify for the year-end quest for the big, bald, golden statuette. Keeping tab of all the brilliant projects is not for the weak of heart. Nevertheless, we have compiled this very preliminary list of the shorts that have won a qualifying prize at one of the world's top film festivals or booked theatrical screening engagements to be officially considered by the Academy for the Best Animated Short Oscar. The official Oscar Shortlist of 15 films will be announced on Tuesday, December 16. Our contenders' list is by no means a definitive one, so we ask you to visit our website for daily updates and additions. Let's not forget that landing on this long list is a remarkable achievement on its own and represents many years of hard work and artists' blood, sweat and tears. (*This dossier will be updated online until the final shortlist is announced.*)

An Angel on Oxford Street

Autokar

Autopollo

A Bird's Wish

The Black Stain

Budō

An Angel on Oxford Street

Country: United Kingdom
Directed by: Paul Shammasian
Produced by: Paul Shammasian, Mike Morris, Murugan Thiruchelvam; La Plage, Resight Films, Creative Cap
Synopsis: Centers on the character Saul and his reluctant journey into Oxford Street, London, where he has an unexpected life changing encounter with a rough sleeper.
Qualifying win: Grand Jury Award for Best Animated Short Film at Edmonton International Film Festival (Canada)

Autokar

Country: Belgium, France
Directed by: Sylwia Szkiłądź
Produced by: Jérémie Mazurek, Christophe Beaujean, Mathieu Rolin, Viviane Vanfleteren, Marc Faye; OZÙ Productions, Novanima, Vivi Film
Synopsis: In the '90s, a little girl named Agata leaves Poland for Belgium. Anxious about her journey, she writes a letter to her father back home to pass the time, but she drops and loses her pencil on the bus. She wanders between the seats in search of the pencil, plunging into a fantastic world populated by strange half-human, half-animal passengers.
Qualifying win: Grand Jury Prize (Golden Pegasus) at Animator International Animated Film Festival (Poland)

Autopollo

Country: Costa Rica
Directed by: Julian Gallese
Produced by: Julian Gallese; HQI
Synopsis: A small group of friends enjoy a ride around a mysterious hamlet.
Qualifying win: Latin American Animated Short Film at BitBang International Animation Festival (Argentina)

A Bird's Wish

Country: Israel, Switzerland
Directed by: Gan de Lange
Produced by: Gan de Lange, Ariel Rosenstein and Kobi Mizrahi; Kobi Mizrahi Productions
Synopsis: This is the story of a bird that could not lay an egg. What price will she pay to finally become a mother?
Qualifying win: Ophir Award for Best Short Animation Film (Israel)

The Black Stain

Country: Mexico
Directed by: Yareni Velázquez Mendoza
Produced by: María Inés Roqué
Synopsis: The black spot tells the story of Marlene's transformation, a woman who in her youth embraced darkness as a true expression of her being and soul. However, the adversities she faced in life allowed her to give that darkness a new meaning.
Qualifying win: Ojo for Best Mexican Animated Short Film at Morelia International Film Festival (Mexico)

Budō

Country: Sweden
Directed by: Alexander Toma, Amanda Aagard
Produced by: Alexander Toma, Amanda Aagard; Amsaga, Film I Väst
Synopsis: On a lonely widow's daily trip to the supermarket, she meets a stray cat. It follows her home and soon makes itself more comfortable in her small Tokyo apartment than she could have

ever imagined.
Qualifying win: Best Animation Short at Palm Springs International ShortFest

Butterfly (Papillon)

Country: France
Directed by: Florence Miailhe
Produced by: Ron Dyens, Claire Maillard, Luc Camilli; Sacrebleu Productions, XBO Films
Synopsis: In the sea, a man swims. As he swims, memories come to the surface. From his early childhood to his life as a man, all his memories are linked to water. Some are happy, others glorious, others traumatic. This story will be his last swim.
Qualifying win: Grand Prix (International Competition) at Stuttgart International Festival of Animated Film (Germany)

Butterfly Kiss

Country: Germany, Israel
Directed by: Zohar Dvir
Produced by: Amit Russell Gicelter, Fabian Driehorst; Fabian&Fred, the Hive Studio
Synopsis: Carol panics and quarrels with her girlfriend, Ray, after an unexpected proposal. The situation worsens when she wakes up to an apocalyptic reality and discovers that Ray has transformed into a butterfly.
Qualifying win: Golden Hugo (Animated Short Film Competition) at Chicago International Film Festival

Cafunè

Country: Spain
Directed by: Carlos F. de Vigo, Lorena Ares
Produced by: Carlos F. de Vigo, Sergy Moreno, Mintxo Díaz, Damián Perea; New Gravity Laws SL, White Leaf Producciones, Damian Perea Producciones
Synopsis: Alma, a solitary refugee child, is thrust back into her traumatic past when her doll falls into the swimming pool, mirroring the shipwreck of the refugee boat where she was the lone survivor. Luna, her savior, steps in to help her overcome her trauma and rebuild her life.
Qualifying win: Best Animated Short Film at the Goya Awards (Spain)

Cardboard

Country: U.K.
Directed by: J.P. Vine
Produced by: Michaela Manas Malina
Synopsis: When an overwhelmed single dad moves his piglets into a trailer park, his kids invent a wildly imaginative game to embrace the future.
Qualified by exhibition.

Como Si la Tierra Se las Hubiera Tragado

(As If the Earth Had Swallowed Them)
Country: France
Directed by: Natalia León
Produced by: Luc Camilli; XBO Films
Synopsis: Olivia, a young woman living abroad, returns to her hometown in Mexico in the hope of reconnecting with her past.
Qualifying wins: Best Animation at LA Shorts International Film Festival; Short Film Jury Award (Animation) at Sundance Film Festival

Cut From the Dead

Country: Turkey
Directed/Produced by: Elif Dönmez, Deniz Koçyiğit
Synopsis: A bulky man with a long messy hair and beard enters a graveyard, digs up a coffin, and then drags it into an abandoned shop. There, he performs a necromantic ritual to raise the corpse from the dead. After the spell is cast, the man sits on a chair in front of a mirror while the corpse rises back to life behind him.
Qualifying win: Best National Short Animation at Izmir International Short Film Festival (Turkey)

David

Country: China
Directed/Produced by: Kai Xue, Hong Jiexi
Synopsis: In a small northeastern town, a lost childhood photo. The sound of a train whistle brings memories of running in sunflower fields. I believe another self exists, like Dawei and me.
Qualifying win: Youssef Chahine Award for Best Short Film at Cairo International Film Festival (Egypt)

Dembaya

Country: Ireland
Directed by: Borja Espana Guillot
Produced by: Shauna Cullen; JAM Media
Synopsis: Forced to flee their African village due to war, a young girl and her family seek refuge in Ireland. As they rebuild their lives, they discover that home is not just a place but a feeling they create together.
Qualifying win: IFTA Award for Animated Short Film at Irish Film & Television Awards (Ireland)

Detlev

Country: Germany
Directed by: Ferdinand Ehrhardt
Produced by: Saskia Stirn, Ferdinand Ehrhardt
Synopsis: A constantly freezing man in his 40s drives to a lonely petrol station every evening and orders a microwaved Toast Hawaii. Detlev indulges in this bizarre ritual because it's the only thing that warms him in his daily life. But when he is observed by a stranger one night, his world begins to crumble into shameful pieces.
Qualifying win: Best Short Film (International Animation) at CINELEBU (Chile)

Dull Spots of Greenish Colors

Country: Germany
Directed by: Sasha Svirsky
Produced by: Nadezhda Svirskaia, Karsten Matern; Wait a Second!
Synopsis: War for our attention has suddenly

Butterfly (Papillon)

Butterfly Kiss

Cafunè

Cardboard

Como Si la Tierra Se las Hubiera Tragado

Cut From the Dead

David

Dembaya

Detlev

Dull Spots of Greenish Colors

Earth Coal

The Eating of an Orange

The Eggregores' Theory

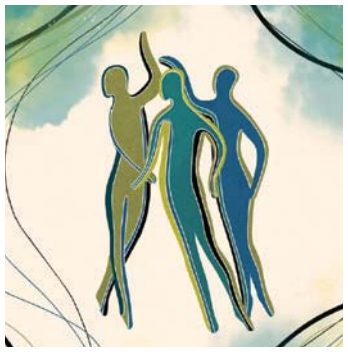
Éiru

Father Figure

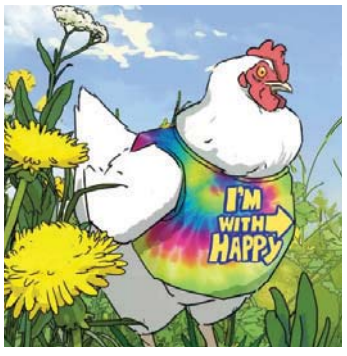
Filante

The Fling

Forevergreen



Fracti



Free the Chickens

become an actual war. Information technologies appear not just as mere means for somebody's ends but as something having their agency, as one of the acting forces rendering possible a horrific event, which is very hard to accept and almost impossible to comprehend.
Qualifying wins: Animated Film at German Short Film Awards (Germany); ASIFA Austria Award at Vienna Shorts International Film Festival (Austria); Grand Prix at Animafest Zagreb (Croatia)

Earth Coal

Country: France
Directed by: Bastien Dupriez
Produced by: Richard Van Den Boom; Papy3D Productions
Synopsis: In the countryside of yesteryear, in the mines and factories, these men of the past seem to share the same sorrows. Something seems to resonate within us today, maybe it's just an illusion, or maybe it's just the humbleness of everyday life.
Qualifying win: International Animated Short Film Competition at Chilemonos International Animation Festival (Chile)

The Eating of an Orange

Country: United Kingdom
Directed/Produced by: May Kindred-Boothby
Synopsis: In a large manor house, identical figures eat the same, move the same, look the same. But everything will change for one woman when she is given an orange by an unknown figure. In the exploration of this new and exciting discovery, she gets transported into another realm of lichens, slugs and sensuous fluidity.
Qualifying win: Grand Jury Prize for Animated Short Film at Seattle International Film Festival

The Eggregores' Theory

Country: Italy
Directed by: Andrea Gatopoulos
Produced by: Marco Crispano, Ariens Damsi, Luigi Mascolo
Synopsis: He doesn't remember much from that time. Things have faded, like the color of a painting exposed to too much light. The only thing that bothers him is the music that keeps popping up in his head. He forgot what it meant, and all he knows for sure is that he can't get rid of it.
Qualifying wins: Best Short Fiction at In the Palace International Short Film Festival (Bulgaria); ZINEBI Grand Prize (International Short Film) at International Festival of Documentaries and Short Films of Bilbao – Zinebi (Spain)

Éiru

Country: Ireland
Directed by: Giovanna Ferrari
Produced by: Nora Twomey, Tomm Moore, Paul Young, Gerry Shirren and Melanie Lynch; Cartoon Saloon, Herstory
Synopsis: When the water mysteriously disappears from the well in a warrior clan's village, an intrepid child descends into the belly of the earth to retrieve it. Éiru is the story of a child in search of a challenge, and a goddess in search of a champion.
Qualifying wins: James Horgan Award for the Best Animation Short at Galway Film Fleadh (Ireland); Animated Grand Prize at Indy Shorts International Film Festival; Best Animated Short at Riverrun International Film Festival

Father Figure

Country: Hong Kong
Directed/Produced by: Shek Ka Chun
Synopsis: Four rooms, four memories. The son steps into a tunnel of recollection during a visit to his long-absent father in prison. Pushing open door after door, he attempts to rediscover the visage of his father within these rooms of memory.
Qualifying win: Best Animated Short Film at Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival (Taiwan)

Filante

Country: France
Directed by: Marion Jamault
Produced by: Lisa Verhaverbeke, Marin Dalmier; Phénomènes Films
Synopsis: Every night, Paulette stands on the lookout of her lighthouse and observes the same shooting star. Her pet rat has mysteriously disappeared, so she sends her wish for a reunion up to the night sky. The apparent celestial body turns out to be a bat with a fondness for glitter.
Qualifying win: Best in Show at Spark Animation (Canada)

The Fling

Country: Australia
Directed by: Jemma Cotter
Produced by: Brett Tinning, Jemma Cotter
Synopsis: This hybrid stop-motion horror rom-com about two women at a fancy restaurant shows us that love is a many tentacled thing.
Qualifying win: Yoram Gross Animation Award at Sydney Film Festival (Australia)

Forevergreen

Country: U.S.A
Directed by: Nathan Engelhardt, Jeremy Spears
Produced by: Steph Gortz, Jennifer Gandrup Sackheim
Synopsis: An orphaned bear cub finds a home with a fatherly evergreen tree until his hunger leads him to danger.
Qualified by exhibition

Fracti

Country: Romania, Switzerland
Directed/Produced by: Lavinia Petrache
Synopsis: Humans live their routines inside an ethereal village floating in the sky. What happens when one of them causes the world to end?
Qualifying win: Best Romanian Film at Animest International Animation Film Festival (Romania)

Free the Chickens

Country: Slovakia, Czech Republic

Directed by: Matus Vizar
Produced by: Tomáš Hrubý, Jakub Viktorín; Nutprodukce, 365 Production
Synopsis: When their mission to free some chickens goes wrong, four animal activists are forced to flee into the jungle, where they face a variety of extreme situations and discover that nature is not always the best place for animals.
Qualifying wins: Best Animated Short Film at Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival of Catalonia (Spain)

Gigi

Country: France
Directed by: Cynthia Calvi
Produced by: Luc Camilli; XBO Films
Synopsis: From the tormented little mermaid to the fulfilled woman she is today, Gigi tells us about her gender transition with humor and sensitivity.
Qualifying win: Helen Hill Animated Short Jury Award at New Orleans Film Festival

The Girl Who Cried Pearls

Country: Canada
Directed by: Chris Lavis, Maciek Szczerbowski
Produced by: Julie Roy, Marc Bertrand, Christine Noël; National Film Board of Canada
Synopsis: In Montreal, at the dawn of the 20th century, a poor boy falls in love with a girl whose sorrow turns into pearls. He sells them to a ruthless pawnbroker, who hungers for more. Tempted by greed, the boy must choose between love and fortune. The choice could damn his soul.
Qualifying win: Best Canadian Short Film at Toronto International Film Festival (Canada)

Glasshouse

Country: Hungary
Directed by: Sárdi Katalin
Produced by: Fülöp József
Synopsis: Glasshouse is a metaphorical stage for the creator's inner world, in which three characters, two actresses and a director embody different emotions. They meet here to shoot a film, but the process has an unexpected impact on all three.
Qualifying win: Best Hungarian Animation at Friss Hús Budapest International Short Film Festival (Hungary)

Humantis

Country: United States
Directed/Produced by: Paris Baillie
Synopsis: Humantises are masters of deception. But can they hide from change? When one Humantis unexpectedly goes through a physical transformation, it struggles to adapt and grow into its new self.
Qualifying win: Grand Jury Prize (Animated Short) at AFI Fest

Hunting

Country: Switzerland
Directed by: Lea Favre
Produced by: Jean-Guillaume Sonnier, Clémence Pun, Paolo Moretti; École Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne
Synopsis: A young girl goes on a hunt — not for animals but for a perfect documentary shot. She learns how to be alert, invisible, ready to capture that one special moment, such as a romantic kiss, a unique gesture or a glint in the eye. However, this charming animation quickly veers off the safe path.
Qualifying wins: Silver Dragon for Best Short Animated Film at Krakow Film Festival (Poland); Best Film (International Competition) at Fantoche International Animation Film Festival (Switzerland)

Il Burattino e la Balena

(The Puppet and the Whale)
Country: France, Italy
Directed by: Roberto Catani
Produced by: Emmanuel-alain Raynal, Pierre Baussaron, Davide Ferazza, Alessandro Giorgio; Miyu Productions, Withstand
Synopsis: The story of a puppet, from his "birth" to the uncertain decision to follow the example of his father/creator, through discovering a humanity that frightens him, and of which he will have to become a part.
Qualifying win: Grand Prize for Best Short Animated Film at Ottawa International Animation Festival (Canada)

Inside, The Valley Sings

Country: Ireland
Directed by: Nathan Fagan
Produced by: Seamus Waters; Wonderbread
Synopsis: Secluded in 6x9 cells year after year with little or no human contact, three individuals in prisons across the U.S. experience the tedium, loneliness and psychological despair of long-term solitary confinement. Over time, they begin to construct elaborate fantasy worlds to escape their daily reality.
Qualifying win: Best Short (Non-Fiction Inside) at Short Shorts Film Festival (Japan)

Larval

Country: United Kingdom
Directed/Produced by: Alice Bloomfield
Synopsis: Living life in isolation, a girl dreams of luxury and beauty, fantasizing about possessing the looks of her celebrity idol and winning the heart of her unrequited love. However, she discovers that she should have been more careful what she wished for.
Qualifying win: Best Animated Short at Raindance Film Festival (U.K.)

Les Bêtes

Country: United States
Directed/Produced by: Michael Granberry
Synopsis: A mysterious rabbit with a set of magic keys summons a host of strange creatures to entertain a wicked king and his decadent court in this dark fantasy inspired by the works of

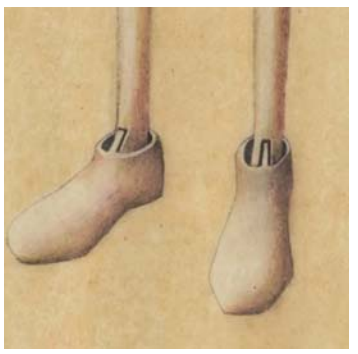
Gigi

The Girl Who Cried Pearls

Glasshouse

Humantis

Hunting


Il Burattino e la Balena

Inside, The Valley Sings

Larval

Les Bêtes

Long Distance

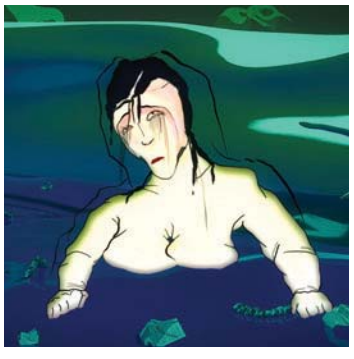
Loop Line

Los Carpinchos

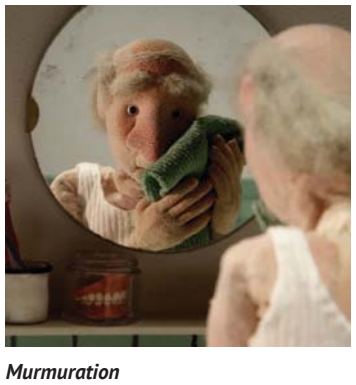
Luz Diabla

Mawtini

Moral Support



Mother's Child



Murmuration

My Brother, My Brother

Ladislas Starevich.
Qualifying wins: Best Animated Short at AmDocs (U.S.); Best Jury Award (Short Films Competition) at Annecy (France)

Long Distance

Country: France
Directed by: Iulia Voitova
Produced by: Valentin Maupin, Aristote Douroudakis
Synopsis: An astronaut prepares for a flight into space, and a diver descends into the depths. The further apart they are, the closer they are.
Qualifying win: Best Animated Short Film at Imaginaria Film Festival (Italy)

Loop Line

Country: India
Directed/Produced by: Renuka Shahane
Synopsis: In the heart of Mumbai, a middle-aged Maharashtrian housewife, endures her husband's chauvinism and the tedium of her relentless chores. She finds solace in her rich fantasies. After a particularly demeaning remark from her husband, she fantasizes about serving them "brain pakoras" made from her brain.
Qualifying win: Best Film in Animated Section at Bengaluru International Short Film Festival (India)

Los Carpinchos

(Capybaras)
Country: France, Uruguay, Chile
Directed by: Alfredo Soderguit
Produced by: Autour de Minuit, Palermo Estudio, Pajaro
Synopsis: A family of capybaras seek refuge in a chicken coop, but the hens don't trust them. The curiosity of the youngest members of the families will create a union with unexpected consequences.
Qualifying win: Latin American Animated Short Film at Chilemonos International Animation Festival (Chile)

Luz Diabla

(Devilish Light)
Country: Argentina, Canada
Directed by: Gervasio Canda, Paula Boffo, Patricio Plaza
Produced by: Gervasio Canda, Paula Boffo, Patricio Plaza, Courtney Wolfson; Ojo Raro, Lakeside Animation
Synopsis: Martin, a flamboyant urban raver, is involved in a strange car accident on his way to a party in the middle of the Argentine Pampas.
Qualifying win: Rigo Mora Award for Best International Animated Short Film at Guadalajara International Film Festival (Mexico)

Mawtini

Country: Switzerland
Directed by: Tabarak Abbas
Produced by: Misam Ghadiali, Delphine Jeanneret, Nicolas Wadimoff; Size Media, Haute école d'art et de design — Genève Département Cinéma, RTS Radio Télévision Suisse
Synopsis: In early '90s Baghdad, in a reality where humans have given way to cyborgs, a young couple and their newborn baby try to flee their country where war has just broken out. This animated film tells a true story and plunges viewers into a futuristic world.
Qualifying win: Best Animated Short Film at Warsaw International Film Festival (Poland)

Moral Support

Country: Germany, Croatia
Directed/Produced by: Vuk Jevremović
Synopsis: The film is inspired by the music of the Slovenian band Laibach, and the song "*Moral Support*." It's about a clash between communists (striking miners) and Yugoslav nationalists in Trbovlje in which dozens of people died. At that time (1924), Slovenia was part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The film evokes echoes of the first decades of the 20th century through artistic movements. It's about the eternal fight between different political concepts and the tragedy of the human victims behind it.
Qualifying win: Chris Frayne Award for Best Animated Film at Ann Arbor Film Festival

Mother's Child

Country: Netherlands
Directed by: Naomi Noir
Produced by: Naomi Noir, Sanne Versteeg
Synopsis: Wading through the bureaucratic mess that comes with caregiving, a loving mother feels isolated, unsupported and sleep deprived. She also struggles to fully understand her disabled, nonverbal son's needs. After being dealt another blow by an obtuse administrator, her reality begins to blur.
Qualifying wins: Best Animated Short at Atlanta Film Festival; Grand Jury Prize (Best Animated Short Film) at Dallas International Film Festival

Murmuration

Country: Netherlands, Belgium
Directed by: Janneke Swinkels, Tim Frijsinger
Produced by: Peter Lindhout, Annemie Degryse, Janneke Swinkels, Tim Frijsinger
Synopsis: Piet, an elderly man in a nursing home, finds himself limited in his actions when he suddenly begins to transform into a bird. Although he is still accepted within the group, he feels that it's time to join a new flock.
Qualifying win: Best Animation Short Film at Melbourne International Film Festival (Australia)

My Brother, My Brother

Country: Egypt, France, Germany
Directed by: Abdelrahman Dnewar, Saad Dnewar
Produced by: Lucas Tothe, Jessica Arfuso, Hesham Marold, Abdallah Dnewar; Punchline Cinéma, Milkman Films
Synopsis: The complexities of a past shared by identical twins Omar and Wesam. A split

narrative retells both sides of their memories — from the instant they were fused together in their mother's womb to the moment when one of them tragically dies.
Qualifying win: Golden Gate Award for Best Animated Short at San Francisco International Film Festival

A Night at the Rest Area

Country: Japan
Directed by: Saki Muramoto
Produced by: Sayaka Omodaka
Synopsis: At a midnight highway rest area, weary travelers each quietly relax their minds. A brief moment spent with complete strangers is lonely yet somehow comforting.
Qualifying win: Grand Jury Award for Animation Short at Slamdance Film Festival

The Night Boots

Country: France
Directed by: Pierre-Luc Granjon
Produced by: Yves Bouveret; Am Stram Gram
Synopsis: In the middle of the night, while his parents are entertaining friends, a child slips on his wellington boots and sneaks off into the woods. There, a strange solitary creature leads him into the heart of the forest to meet the nocturnal inhabitants.
Qualifying win: Cristal for a Short Film at Annecy Festival (France)

No Vacancy

Country: United States, Colombia
Directed/Produced by: Miguel Rodrick
Synopsis: *No Vacancy* explores the unraveling mind of Jack, depicted through his dilapidated motel. The film blurs reality and memory through vivid, often disorienting imagery. Jack navigates chaotic nights filled with mysterious phone calls, deep-seated humiliation, addiction struggles and the inescapable weight of his past mistakes**.**
Qualifying win: Best U.S. Latino Animated Short Award at Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival

Ordinary Life

Country: France, Japan
Directed by: Yoriko Mizushiri
Produced by: Emmanuel-Alain Raynal, Pierre Baussaron, Nobuaki Doi
Synopsis: Ordinary life repeats itself every day. The succession of moments that we repeat over and over again is never the same, and everything changes and wavers. In an uncertain and fluctuating world, only the feeling of the body touching something, which exists only in this present reality, can be recognized as "now."
Qualifying win: Best Animated Short at Nashville Film Festival

Overture

Country: Czech Republic
Directed by: Jakub Hronský
Produced by: Academy of Art, Architecture and Design in Prague (UMPRUM)
Synopsis: The film follows a humanoid insect whose presence and actions continuously alter and transform the surrounding world of a Bratislava housing estate. But what can emerge from its "devouring" and transforming of its environment? What changes will it bring?
Qualifying win: Best Slovak Animated Short at Fest Anča International Animation Festival (Slovakia)

Patterns

Country: Germany
Directed/Produced by: Alex Glawion
Synopsis: A passenger's optimistic train journey swiftly descends into a nightmare when he is struck by noise and rudeness, forcing him to don his headphones and escape into a vibrant, patterned world. Here, an unexpected encounter with a lively woman lifts his spirits, and their playful interaction brightens the journey.
Qualifying win: Best Animated Short Film at Cleveland International Film Festival

Pelikan Blue

Country: Hungary
Directed by: László Csáki
Produced by: Ádám Felszeghy, Miklós Kázmér; Umbrella Entertainment, Cinemon Entertainment
Synopsis: In 1990s Hungary, travel is finally possible, but unaffordable. By forging international train tickets by dissolving Pelikan's Blue carbon ink, three young men provide the opportunity for a whole generation to experience the outside world.
Qualifying win: Golden Dove (International Competition Short Animated Film) International Leipzig Festival for Documentary and Animated Film (Germany)

Playing God

Country: Italy, France
Directed by: Matteo Burani
Produced by: Arianna Gheller, Nicolas Schmerkin
Synopsis: A clay sculpture comes to life in the darkness of a workshop, surrounded by strange creatures.
Qualifying wins: Best Animated Short Film Award at Tribeca Film Festival; Grand Jury Award at Animayo (Spain)

Psychonauts

Country: Croatia
Directed by: Niko Radas
Produced by: Filip Gašparović Melis; Croatian Association of Digital Artists
Synopsis: Leaving their human hosts, mental disorders take on anthropomorphic forms and find new refuges.
Qualifying wins: Best Short Animation at Guanajuato International Film Festival (Mexico)

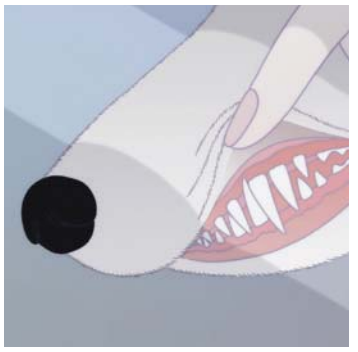
Quota

Country: Netherlands
Directed/Produced by: Job, Joris & Marieke

A Night at the Rest Area

The Night Boots

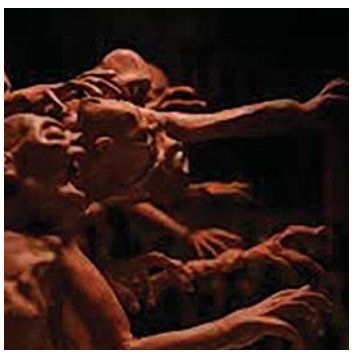
No Vacancy


Ordinary Life

Overture

Patterns

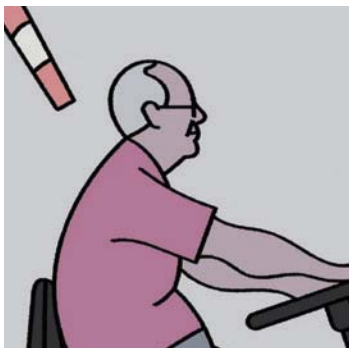
Pelikan Blue


Playing God

Psychonauts

Quota

Reborn With You



Retirement Plan

The Sacred Society

Satomi

Scars We Love

Shadows

The Shyness of Trees

Sisowath Quay

Skroll

Snow Bear

Synopsis: When every global citizen is mandated to participate in a program that tracks their CO2 emissions, it makes little impression. Until they discover what happens when their designated quota has been reached.
Qualifying win: Best Animation at Aspen Shortsfest

Reborn With You

Country: South Korea
Directed/Produced by: Inju Park
Synopsis: One day, I dedicated a part of myself to my sister's soul, which disappeared in name-calling. It was the day I realized that this death might be mine. So I decided to move to a world of her remains to be reborn together.
Qualifying win: PÖFF Shorts (Best Animation Short) at Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (Estonia)

Retirement Plan

Country: Ireland
Directed by: John Kelly
Produced by: Julie Murnaghan, Andrew Freedman; Antidote
Synopsis: A short animated film commissioned by Screen Ireland and RTÉ, *Retirement Plan* tells the story of Ray as he fantasizes about everything he'd love to do in retirement, once he finally has the "time."
Qualifying wins: Best Irish Professional Short at Animation Dingle (Ireland); Best of the Festival Award at Palm Springs International ShortFest; Animation Shorts Competition Jury Award at South by Southwest

The Sacred Society

Country: United States
Directed/Produced by: Benny Zelkowicz
Synopsis: Centers on the volunteers who clean and prepare and dress bodies for burial according to Jewish tradition, an exploration of why they choose this work and how it changes them.
Qualifying win: Best Documentary Short Award at San Francisco Jewish Film Festival

Satomi

Country: Japan, United States, Hong Kong
Directed by: Rayner Wang
Produced by: Roy Finch, Susie Landau Finch, Georgina Pope
Synopsis: Combining animation and live-action footage, this short film tells the story of a singer's attempts to overcome her stage fright with the help of her favorite artist.
Qualifying win: Best Animated Short at St. Louis International Film Festival

Scars We Love

Country: France
Directed by: Raphael Jouzeau
Produced by: Francesca Betteni Barnes, Charlotte Vande Vyvre; Balade Sauvage Productions
Synopsis: Gaspard is still very much in love with Leïla. They meet in a crowded bar a month after she left him. The conversation turns awry and, as he feels tears welling up, Gaspard seeks refuge under the tablecloth, away from prying eyes and closer to his memories.
Qualifying win: Best Short Film at Kaboom Animation Festival (Netherlands)

Shadows

Country: France, Jordan
Directed by: Rand Beiruty
Produced by: Idris Lettifi, Jude Kawwa, Moussa Lettifi; Shaghab Films, Piano Sano Films
Synopsis: The true story of Ahlam, a teenage mother who fled Iraq, impelled by a desire for freedom. The narrator shares her memories on a metaphorical journey in an airport, where dreams and ghosts of the past intertwine.
Qualifying wins: Grand Prize (World Animation Competition) at Leeds International Film Festival (U.K.); Grand Prize at Regard - Saguenay International Short Film Festival (Canada)

The Shyness of Trees

Country: France
Directed by: Sofiia Chuikovska, Loïck du Plessis D'Argentré, Lina Han, Simin He, Jiaxin Huang, Maud Le Bras & Bingqing Shu
Produced by: Gobelins, l'Ecole de l'Image
Synopsis: When Helene visits her aging mother in the countryside, she discovers that the older woman seems to have formed a strange bond with plants, insects and the old oak tree at the end of her garden.
Qualifying Win: Bronze Medal Student Oscar

Sisowath Quay

Country: France
Directed by: Stéphanie Lansaque, François Leroy
Produced by: Gladys De Micheli, Stéphanie Lansaque, François Leroy; Bobine B
Synopsis: Nakry and Sothear meet on Sisowath Quay for their first date. At nightfall, the romance turns into a nightmare when the young girl transforms into a strange creature.
Qualifying win: Børge Ring Award (Animation Competition) at Odense International Film Festival

Skroll

Country: Netherlands
Directed by: Marten Visser
Produced by: Michiel Snijders, Arnoud Rijken; il Luster Films
Synopsis: Humans and some kind of gnomes have posted videos on social media platforms in their animated dimension. This film is a short compilation of these clips. An animated random flow of social media content that really "will surprise you" and is worth "watching till the end." But No. 3 will not shock you.
Qualifying win: Best Dutch Short Film at Kaboom Animation Festival (Netherlands)

Snow Bear

Country: U.S.
Directed by: Aaron Blaise

Produced by: Nicholas Burch
Synopsis: A lonely polar bear creates an imaginary companion out of snow after he can't find his friend in his harsh habitat.
Qualified by exhibition.

Solstice

Country: Scotland
Directed/Produce by: Luke Angus
Synopsis: A lonely Inuit must endure the endless summer daylight to be reunited with his lost love.
Qualifying win: Best Short Animation at Short Shorts Film Festival (Japan**)**

Sorrow (Quebranto)

Country: Colombia
Directed/Produced by: Issabella Rozo Gonzalez
Synopsis: Mysterious creatures stop someone from everything he intends to do as he goes about his daily activities.
Qualifying win: Santa Lucia for Best Animation Short Film (National Competition) at Bogoshorts (Colombia)

Sparrows

Country: Belgium, France
Directed by: Rémi Durin
Produced by: Arnaud Demuynck; Les Films du Nord
Synopsis: In a Buddhist temple, young monks begin their meditation when the master arrives. One of the children is distracted by a sparrow and follows the bird outside the monastery. Here begins a walk off the beaten paths that goes through the tour of his lifetime.
Qualifying win: Jury Award (Best Animated Short) at New York International Children's Film Festival

Speed Reader

Country: Spain
Directed/Produced by: Jennifer Levonian
Synopsis: *Speed Reader* follows a set of identical twins as their lives weave in and out of one another, creating a poignant portrayal of what it is to see and be seen or not seen by loved ones through the vicissitudes of life.
Qualifying win: 1st Prize (Animated Short) at Athens International Film + Video Festival

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Chrome Alone 2 — Lost in New Jersey

Country: United States
Directed by: Kent Seki
Produced by: Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, James Weaver, Jeff Rowe, Ramsay McBean; Nickelodeon Movies, Point Grey Pictures
Synopsis: When a mysterious toy company exploits the Turtles' newfound fame, the brothers follow the clues to New Jersey where they stumble upon a shocking discovery.
Qualified by Exhibition

The Three Sisters

Country: Cyprus
Directed by: Kognov Timur
Produced by: Robinovich Zalman; Polydont Films
Synopsis: Three sisters live a lonely life on an isolated island, each in their own small house. One day, circumstances develop in such a way that they are forced to rent out one of the houses.
Qualifying win: Best Animated Short Film at Santa Barbara International Film Festival

Trash

Country: France
Directed by: Gregory Bouzid, Maxime Crançon, Robin Delaporte, Mattéo Durand, Romain Fleischer, Alexis Le Ral, Margaux Lutz, Fanny Vecchie
Produced by: ESMA — Ecole Supérieure des Métiers Artistiques
Synopsis: In a dark alley, a scrawny rat has no choice but to fight with a pigeon for a small slice of pizza. Without a second thought they throw themselves in a vertiginous chase from the top to the bottom of the street.
Qualifying win: Best Short Animated Film at Cinequest Film Festival; Best in Show at SIGGRAPH

The 12 Inch Pianist

Country: United States
Directed by: Lucas Ansel
Produced by: Lucas Ansel, Rhode Island School of Design
Synopsis: A bar joke goes awry, unraveling into a surreal tale that explores the acceptance of self, others, queer identity, a 12-inch-tall pianist, and a wish-granting genie!
Qualifying win: Silver Medal Student Oscar

Two One Two

Country: Canada
Directed/Produce by: Shira Avni
Synopsis: *Two One Two*, by award-winning filmmaker Shira Avni, combines shimmering clay on glass animation with personal archives in this deeply intimate, experimental animated documentary love letter to motherhood, parenting on the spectrum, and two headed monsters everywhere.
Qualifying wins: Franklin J. Schaffner Jury Award for Mini-Doc at Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival

Versa

Country: U.S.
Directed by: Malcon Pierce
Produced by: Walt Disney Animation Studios
Synopsis: A youngw couple experience a range of emotions, from grief and loss to ultimate love, joy and acceptance, as they embark on an ethereal "cosmic dance of life."
Qualified by Exhibition

Solstice

Sorrow (Quebranto)

Sparrows

Speed Reader

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Chrome Alone 2 — Lost in New Jersey

The Three Sisters

Trash

The 12 Inch Pianist

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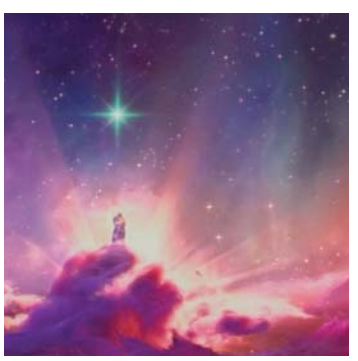

Versa

A Very Twisted Tale

Voyage of the Red Rabbit

Wednesdays with Gramps

Whale 52

Winter in March

A Very Twisted Tale

Country: France
Directed by: Catherine Buffat, Jean-Luc Gréco
Produced by: Les Films à Carreaux
Synopsis: Every evening, Brindone, a teenager, goes to bed before the end of the TV programs. Every evening, instead of going to bed discreetly, his big brother Musclor turns on the light in their shared bedroom to annoy him. Every evening the same routine. Brindone can't take it anymore.
Qualifying win: Animest Trophy at Animest International Animation Film Festival (Romania)

Voyage of the Red Rabbit

Country: United States
Directed/Produced by: Sam Gualtieri
Synopsis: An anthropomorphic Rabbit-Spaceman searches for his home in the outer bounds of the universe. Meanwhile, an old man on Earth eats apple pie and considers what happens in the afterlife.
Qualifying win: Grand Jury Award (Best Animated Short) at Florida Film Festival

Wednesdays with Gramps

Country: United States
Directed by: Chris Copeland and Justin Copeland
Produced by: Shabrayia B. Cleaver; DreamWorks Animation
Synopsis: When a teenage boy visits his grandfather at a his assisted living facility, he realizes that they have much more in common than he thought.
Qualified by Exhibition

Whale 52

Country: U.S.
Directed by: Daniel Neiden
Produced and written by: Edward Jordon and Daniel Neiden
Synopsis: Inspired by a true story, the short tells a poignant tale of connection between a third-grade student who's selectively mute and a lonely 80-year-old volunteer who's mourning the death of his male partner. Animated by Bill Plympton.
Qualified by Exhibition

Winter in March

Country: Estonia, Armenia, France
Directed by: Natalia Mirzoyan
Produced by: Black Boat Pictures
Synopsis: Helpless in the face of a repressive state, a young couple leaves their home — an escape that turns into a surreal nightmare.
Qualifying win: Heart of Sarajevo for the Best Short Film at Sarajevo Film Festival (Bosnia and Herzegovina) ■

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TRIUMPHANT TRIO

This year's three Student Academy Award winners offer a charming variety of subjects, techniques and styles.

By Ellen Wolff

A man walks into a bar…" This classic line might be the setup for one of the oldest jokes in the world, but this year it also provided a hook for Student Academy Award-winning film *The 12 Inch Pianist*. Animator Lucas Ansel, who directed the stop-motion project while attending the Rhode Island School of Design, recalls bouncing around ideas for his film when someone suggested he consider "guy walks into a bar" jokes. "I felt like an idiot for not having thought of that sooner," Ansel admits. "That's how I discovered Simon Rich's brilliant short story in *The New Yorker*, and he generously let me base my screenplay on it."

The New York-based Ansel felt right at home when he collected his medal for his popular short, as this year's Student Academy Awards were presented on Oct. 6 at the Ziegfeld Ballroom during the New York Film Festival. His fellow medalists had a longer road to travel: The winners from the Gobelins Master's Program in Character Animation and Animated Filmmaking — led by Sofiia Chuikovska, Loïck du Plessis d'Argentré and Maud Le Bras — traveled from France to receive their prize for *The Shyness of Trees*. And winner Tobias Eckerlin, from the Film Academy Baden-Württemberg, came all the way from Germany to accept his medal for *A Sparrow's Song*.

This year's three prizewinning films couldn't be more different — and not just because of their diverse countries of origin. These student animators have all created unexpected characters who inhabit distinctive worlds. *The 12 Inch Pianst* takes viewers into a gritty dive bar where its stop-motion protagonist comes face to face with surreal characters confronting queer identities. By contrast, *The Shyness of Trees* explores the relationship between a dying woman and her adult daughter, and blends sweeping visions of botanical imagery with poignant dialog. Life-and-death issues also lie at the heart of *A Sparrow's Song,* which uses CG stylized realism to breathe life into a WWII-era underground bunker, depicting how living beings survive against war's extreme odds:

GOLD

A Sparrow's Song

Directed by Tobias Eckerlin

Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg (Germany)

Tobias Eckerlin

From 2022 to 2025, a core group of artists from the Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg joined director Tobias Eckerlin to realize his vision for a computer-animated wartime tale, *A Sparrow's Song*. Eckerlin, who earned his directing diploma from the school's Animationsinstitut, credits the contributions of 56 people in helping realize his vision for the film.

To direct such a large team, Eckerlin used the key tools of PureRef, Autodesk Flow and SyncSketch. "We had an animatic, a project bible, an animation bible and a style guide."

The dark, emotional story centers on an elderly WWII widow who nurses an injured sparrow back to life while escaping repeated bombings in an underground bunker. The film's stylized realism, with its chiaroscuro lighting, captures the subtle ways in which human kindness can survive the inhumanities of war. The gentle touch of the widow's hands cradling the injured bird provide the film's tender signature image. "Hands are such an important part of human communication," notes Eckerlin. "In connection with the sparrow's small size, the idea emerged to convey the characters' emotions through their hands. Our animators brought the hands to life in such a detailed and beautiful way."

(A fitting coincidence is that the Animationsinstitut is now headed by former Pixar director Jan Pinkava, whose Oscar-winning 1997 short *Geri's Game* was heralded for its expressive depiction of human hands.)

SILVER

The 12 Inch Pianist

Directed by: Lucas Ansel

Rhode Island School of Design (U.S.)

Lucas Ansel

The clearest path to a finished production isn't always evident for student animators, especially given the diversity of tools available today. Rhode Island School of Design graduate Lucas Ansel candidly recalls, "I came into senior year still having no clue what to make, and there was a fair amount of pressure from my teachers to just *start*. I didn't want to move forward without a strong story, so in a very untraditional way (for animation), I just started building a set. Since the style I've developed uses stop-motion characters composited into Blender 3D digital environments, I had the freedom to build without worrying about taking sets apart or fitting a huge camera into them.

"I started with a grungy dive-bar bathroom," he explains. "They're interesting spaces to me, full of texture and hidden stories. When the story still hadn't come to me, I built out the rest of the bar set, killing time [by] filling it with as many intricate details as I could." Once Ansel discovered Simon Rich's *New Yorker* story, his team of classmates and friends fell into place. Everyone had some filmmaking experience, but not all had done stop motion before. Ansel's mom even made the puppets.

Ansel says the 7.5-minute-long *The 12 Inch Pianist* exhausted his entire tool kit. "The film features clay puppets with hand-tailored clothes animated on greenscreen and composited into Blender environments," he recalls. "Along with keying and compositing every shot in After Effects, I also animated the characters' pupils and mouths in post with custom Photoshopped assets for every shot to match the on-set lighting. Finally, I photo-scanned all my puppets, using them as digi-double stand-ins for lighting and compositing references."

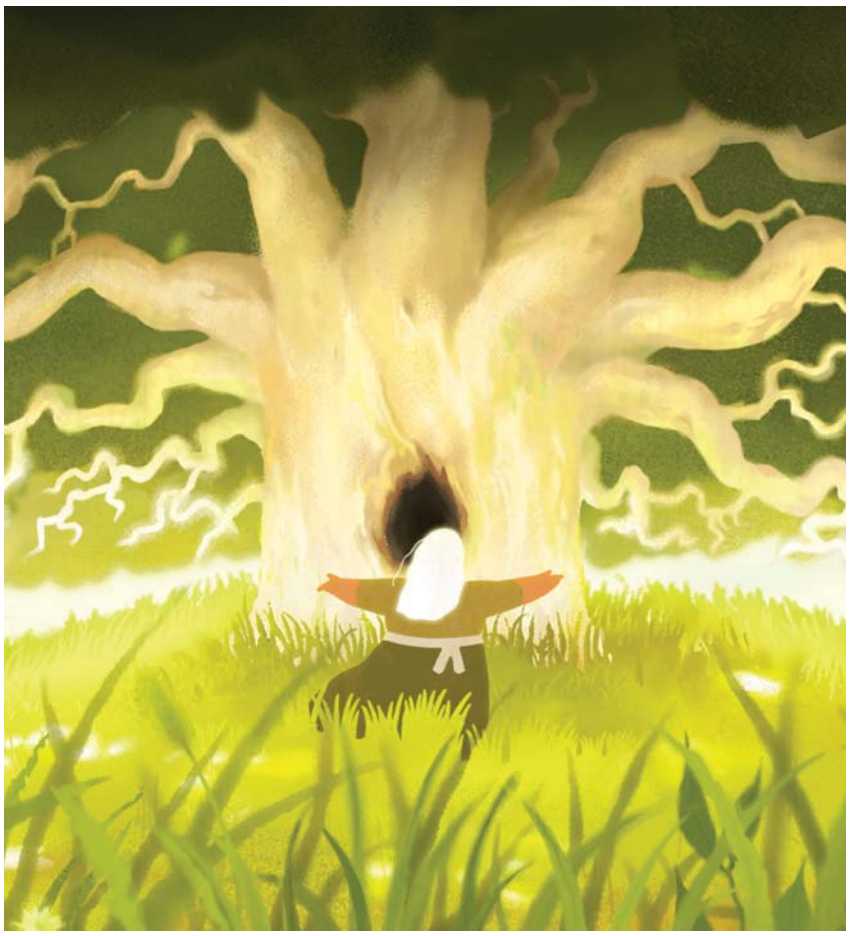
Ansel might have gotten a slow start on his short, but after a year and a half in production, he had completed a winning film.

BRONZE

The Shyness of Trees

Directed by Sofiia Chuikovska, Loïck du Plessis d'Argentré and Maud Le Bras

Gobelins (France)



"A little bit of everything" was the phrase that the students from Gobelins use to describe their winning film, *The Shyness of Trees*. The nine-minute piece follows a woman's visit to her elderly mother in the countryside, where she witnesses an uncanny affinity between her aging parent and a mighty, mysterious oak tree.

The Paris-based trio of Sofiia Chuikovska, Loïck du Plessis d'Argentré and Maud Le Bras headed up the yearlong production, working from Loïck's original script. As he explains, "During preproduction, a lot of drawings were made traditionally with pen and paper, and some animation tests were made with different mediums like gouache, aquarelle and pastels. Then during production, it was almost all digital — animating in TVPaint and using 3ds for some set designs or as a reference for the character models. We also used compositing tricks in After Effects to mimic digitally some of the traditional texture tests, in order to save some time."

The Shyness of Trees has the quality of a dream, as the younger woman struggles to make sense of her mother's world. Fellow students Lina Han, Simin He, Jiaxin Huang and Bingqing Shu each contributed little parts of their own relationships with their parents to the story, which informed the final narrative. Sofiia Chuikovska, who directed the production, notes, "Some people were very specialized and focused on polishing specific aspects of the film, while others were very polyvalent and carried the workload doing a little bit of everything." Given how deeply collaborative this production turned out to be, it is fitting that the whole team attened the awards ceremony in New York City. As Chuikovska notes, "It will be the first time since the end of school that we're all reunited."

Considering that this year's competition received 3,127 entries from 988 colleges and universities worldwide, it seems like the perfect reunion. ■

To the Vector Belong the Spoils

Celebrating 60 Years of *The Dot and the Line*

By Rich Johnson

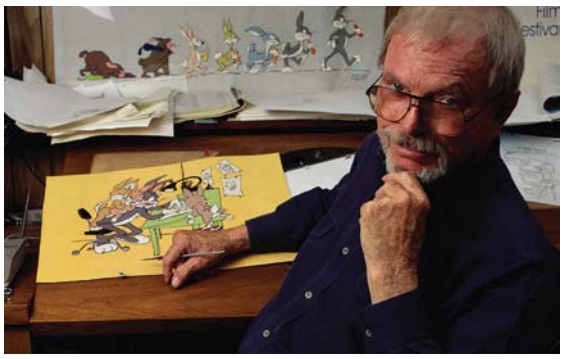
The world may be a complex place … and love only part of the equation. Considering this, it would be worth reminding ourselves of the genius in Chuck Jones' adaptation of Norton Juster's fable *The Dot and the Line: A Romance in Lower Mathematics* for MGM. There has rarely been a love story as simple and effective since the book's publication in 1962 — on one level, a profound meditation on life; on another, a charming lesson on art, identity and personal growth. Resting under its surface is a quietly revolutionary message.

When the film was released on Dec. 31, 1965, the U.S. was steeped in a cultural transformation as the nation faced the Civil Rights Movement (in *full* force), an escalating Vietnam War and a Space Race symbolizing both the promises (and perils) of modernity. While not overtly political, *The Dot and the Line* spoke to this specific moment in the most subtle of ways. The Line's journey (as a character) is about overcoming limitation — not by tearing down boundaries but by mastering them and, in this self-discovery, he learns new ways of "being," not by rejecting his nature but expanding on it.

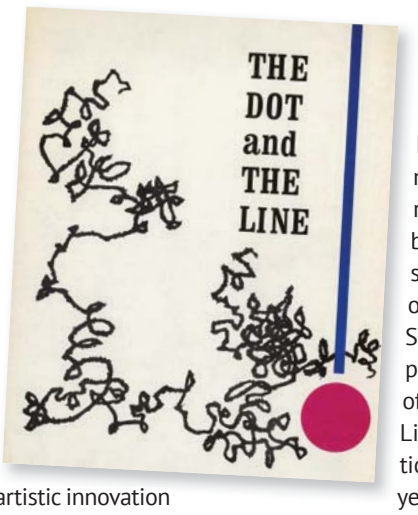
Even on paper, the original story presented a most playful geometric parable, one that tells the tale of the rigid Line who falls *hopelessly* in love with the carefree Dot, only to find himself outmatched by the wild charms of the chaotic Squiggle. But rather than resorting to jealousy or despair, the Line sets out to better himself — learning curves, angles, shapes and, therefore, transformation. In doing so, he discovers new dimensions of himself and ultimately wins the Dot's affection through the power of self-discipline and creative growth. With all of this in mind, the heart of the story reveals a love triangle built on mathematical metaphors, spatial wit and emotional clarity brought vividly to life by renowned Warner Bros. animator Chuck Jones in collaboration with designer Maurice Noble. The result: a critically acclaimed 10-minute film that would go on to win the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film.

Sixty years later, in an age of digital effects and hyperreal animation, *The Dot and the Line* remains a singular piece of storytelling. The minimalist lines and abstract characters still resonate, presenting a universal tale delivered with the elegance of Euclidean geometry and (what resembles) the wit of a mathematician somehow calculating a formula for love.

Juster, an architect by training and a wordplay enthusiast by instinct, had already found literary success with *The Phantom Tollbooth* (1961), a whimsical novel that played with language, logic and learning. It is therefore no surprise that *The Dot and the Line* followed a similar philosophy, blending visual simplicity with something much deeper.



From the aftermath of World War II to the height of the Cold War, it would seem that the rise of this "visual simplicity" through the arrival of abstract art in the galleries of New York, coupled with a growing cultural fascination with both science and absurdity, was perhaps the answer for an upcoming generation. This is where the Cartoon Modern movement embraced minimalist design and those abstract forms with heavily stylized animation — often referred to as the UPA style — breaking away from the realism of earlier commercial cartoons. *The Dot and the Line* is a prime example of this revolutionary style, emphasising artistic innovation and modernist principles within the medium.



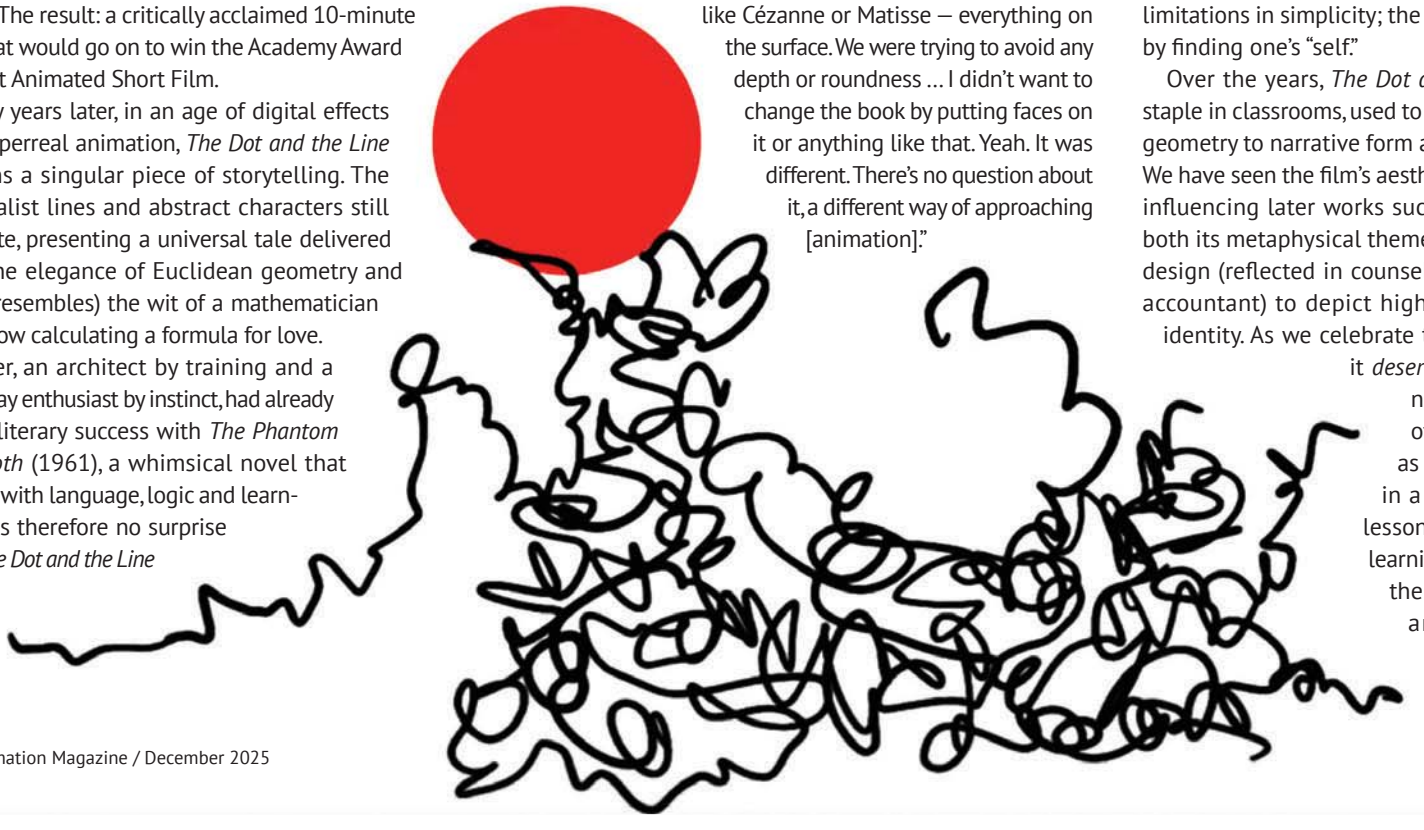
Already a legend from his work on *Looney Tunes* — and now in MGM territory — Chuck Jones saw in Juster's book a perfect springboard to explore such experimental animation. In an interview from 1994 (*A Pinewood Dialogue*), Jones recalled: "We were determined that we would keep — like Cézanne or Matisse — everything on the surface. We were trying to avoid any depth or roundness … I didn't want to change the book by putting faces on it or anything like that. Yeah. It was different. There's no question about it, a different way of approaching [animation]."

"Animation isn't the illusion of life; it is life!"
—CHUCK JONES, UPI ARCHIVES (1988)

A minimalist at heart, Jones had already played with innovative narratives in 1953's *Duck Amuck,* involving the meta concept of Daffy Duck interacting with his animator. In contrast to Mel Blanc's iconic spluttering, this more *elegant* short presented a droll, charming narration, courtesy of British actor Robert Morley: a voice that aligns perfectly with the stripped-back animation style, reducing everything to the bare essentials of sparse backgrounds, abstract characters and sublime orchestrated transitions.

It is easy to be misled by the simplicity of the visuals, with Jones and Noble employing sophisticated techniques such as drawing on Japanese rice paper that allowed the ink to bleed more organically (ah, that subtle *fuzz*) before being transferred onto animation cels. This detail gave Squiggle more of an erratic energy perfectly suited to his character and, of course, contrasted beautifully with Line's more "measured" transformations. We cannot escape the love story, yet, more profoundly, it is a journey of self-discovery and mastery, which, in turn, becomes the perfect source for any *master* animator to explore the discipline. Line — much like Juster or Jones, at the height of their respective crafts — doesn't change to become someone (or *something*) else; he learns to express more of what he already is. However, this isn't to be mistaken for limitations in simplicity; the transformation internalized by finding one's "self."

Over the years, *The Dot and the Line* has become a staple in classrooms, used to teach everything from basic geometry to narrative form and character development. We have seen the film's aesthetic and narrative approach influencing later works such as Pixar's *Soul* (2020) in both its metaphysical themes and its use of minimalist design (reflected in counselor Jerry and Terry the soul accountant) to depict higher realms of thought and identity. As we celebrate the film's 60th anniversary, it *deserves* a renewed recognition, not just as a quaint artifact of midcentury animation but as a timeless meditation that, in a mere 10 minutes, offers a lesson many of us spend decades learning: that with intention, even the simplest — the underseen and underappreciated — among us can bend, stretch and rise to greatness. ■



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RETURN TO SAMURAI ROOTS

By Kambole Campbell

The triumphant third season of *Star Wars: Visions* offers nine new tales of the Force, filtered through an anime perspective.

The *Star Wars* universe continues to grow with the animated anthology *Star Wars: Visions*, the third volume of which was released Oct. 29. Untethered from the family drama of the Skywalker Saga, the series allows a variety of animation studios to redefine the boundaries of *Star Wars*, with a wealth of different directors exploring this universe and its themes through thrillingly varied lenses.

The first volume focused on anime-style storytelling — with production from the likes of acclaimed studios such as Production I.G, Studio Trigger and Science Saru and many more, with some studios submitting multiple shorts by different directors. The second season expanded even further and added a wealth of international studios, including the United Kingdom's Aardman, South Africa's Triggerfish, Chile's Punkrobot and Ireland's Cartoon Saloon. Now, the anthology returns to anime, with a mix of new and returning studios, including some that are picking up where they left off with their prior shorts.

Lucas Lingua Franca

James Waugh, one of the show's trio of executive producers, highlights that the core of the show was born from both a love of anime and a desire to see what *Star Wars* would look like in the hands of other creatives. "The real joy was seeing, like, how you [can] take a specific cultural perspective and see it through the lens of creators and through the lens of *Star Wars*," he says. As for why anime became the first focal point of *Star Wars: Visions*, Waugh says it was a result of pure anime fandom and the fact that anime was the "lingua franca" around Lucasfilm.

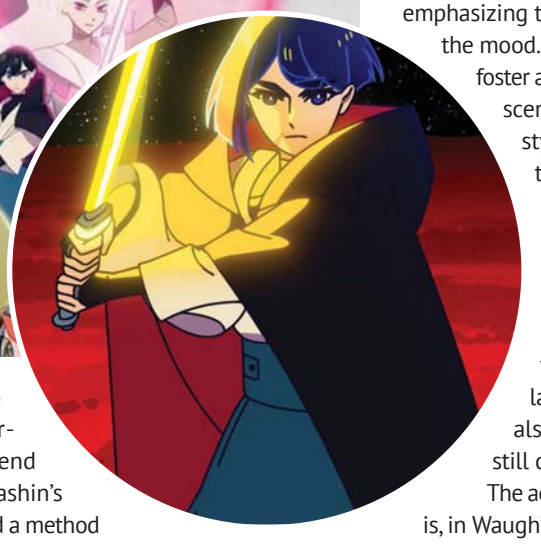
"The initial idea came from how we all loved anime. It was sort of a shorthand, I think, for a lot of us when we were talking about just animation techniques, filmmaking techniques, even when I'm working with the game teams on story development," Waugh says. He highlights the work of Dave Filoni as an example of how this love pervades Lucasfilm, noting Filoni's inspirations in Japanese culture and filmmaking techniques. "We all sort of grew up on the same things that we're still passionate about. So that really started *Visions* from this aesthetic and style of voice that we loved, and wanted to see *Star Wars* be realized in."

Waugh says Lucasfilm President Kathleen Kennedy was also key in getting *Visions* (and later, *Visions Presents*) off the ground, as well as pushing for a creators-first ethos.

The anthology format felt like the best framework to achieve that goal with the producer team. Waugh says that they didn't want to simply hand over a list of demands to be produced.

"It became really clear that we didn't want to act as a Western studio that just sort of went there and said, 'We want your aesthetic, here's the story we want you to tell and here's the canon you need to follow,'" Waugh says. "We wanted to empower [the creators] as much as possible and allow for things that normally might not fit."

The new volume continues along that track, and Waugh



Japanese Jedi: The third season of *Star Wars: Visions* showcases nine diverse animation styles and storytelling approaches through the unique perspectives of studios Kamikaze Douga, Kinema Citrus Co., Production I.G, Trigger, David Production, Polygon Pictures, WIT Studio, and Project Studio Q, with ANIMA co-producing a short with Kamikaze Douga.

notes that they were more hands-off than usual with the short-form industry legend Shinya Ohira and says that *Vision Presents*, an avenue for spinoff series like *The Ninth Jedi*, gives the artists a bigger canvas.

Perhaps the most telling example of the different flavors that anime studios brought to *Visions* is Volume One's *The Duel*, produced by Kamikaze Douga and directed by Takanobu Mizuno, who returns for a follow-up story in Volume Three titled *The Duel: Payback*. Each short is forward-thinking but informed by the past, and Mizuno underlines how they pulled from both the history of samurai films and modern 3D animation.

"In the previous film, *The Duel*, we aimed to create a *Star Wars* work that maximized the influence of Akira Kurosawa's jidaigeki films," Mizuno says. In order to get the look of a monochrome jidaigeki film, the team sought out analog backgrounds resembling sumi-e paintings.

Achieving what Mizuno calls an "analog flavor" was also tricky with current mainstream digital painting, according to the director, because using this style meant the production was unable to use all the "digital conveniences" available to them. "For example, using a free-moving 3D camera in space required a lot of effort, so the number of cuts where a 3D camera could be used was limited." Mizuno adds that for *The Duel: Payback*, they solved this through collaboration. "We were able to co-produce with Anima, a studio with advanced 3D CG technology, which allowed us to create backgrounds that fused analog and 3D CG to a greater degree than before. Thanks to complex camera mapping, it became possible to animate backgrounds with the texture of sumi-e paintings in a three-dimensional way."

The analog paintings themselves were born from consultation with Yuji Kaneko of the background art studio Aoshashin. "He was very cooperative and offered many suggestions," Mizuno says. "For the character textures to blend naturally with Aoshashin's backgrounds, we used a method we had been researching for some time: adding subtle fluctuations to 3DCG to give it the warmth of hand-drawn art. Additionally, we applied 2D hatching textures to add shading." The team only added color to the glowing elements of the piece, such as lightsabers and blasters.

Besides this old-school samurai film feel, one thing that stood out about *The Duel* was its wild lightsaber designs. Mizuno says that these were all ideas from character designer Takashi Okazaki. "I heard that the parasol-shaped saber used by the bandit boss in *The Duel* was inspired by the hidden umbrella weapon in *Lady Snowblood*," he says. Okazaki came up with an even wilder weapon design in *The Duel: Payback* in what Mizuno calls a sudden flash of inspiration. "I remember being very excited when we first saw it. After that, we had to consider how to actually create this complex design," Mizuno adds.

The pursuit of an explicitly analog feel was also a priority for director Masahiko Ōtsuka (a founder of Studio Trigger) on *The Smuggler*, a follow-up to the director's previous work, *The Elder*, on Volume One of *Visions*. However, Ōtsuka says that while the production was tempted to revisit characters from *The Elder*, they had too many new things they wanted to explore. And some personal ambitions too. "One of the reasons I overturned my retirement and made a comeback of directing is that I regretted not being able to join the sound mix process at Skywalker Sound, which I had been looking forward to, because of the pandemic. This time, I was able to work with them too," Ōtsuka adds.

The visual direction was inspired in part by the breadth of styles in Volumes One and Two. "Various ways of approaches and expressions of the other shorts inspired me so much. At the same time, I noticed that each work incorporated the look created by up-to-date digital techniques. That made me think that it would be interesting to create a work with the look of older, analog Japanese anime, enhanced with digital tools."

To make the art feel authentic to the analog anime style, the team mixed in designs from older *Star Wars* films while bringing in new elements to keep it fresh and emphasizing the unique background art to contribute to the mood. Aside from the look, Ōtsuka also sought to foster a different tone. "In *The Elder*, I gave the battle scene heavy tension and chose an animation style with a more realistic feel, because of the concept of aiming toward a *Star Wars* with [the tone of] Japanese period drama." Conversely, *The Smuggler* looks to a more nostalgic atmosphere. "This time, I wanted to bring in rather light conversation and exhilarating action like in *Episode IV*, with the lively spirit of Japanese anime from the late '70s to early '80s in my mind," he says, also noting that this is when *Star Wars* was still quite new to audiences.

The aesthetic variety even just between two shorts is, in Waugh's eyes, critical to making *Star Wars: Visions* stand out and what will continue to give it life. He cites Aardman's *I Am Your Mother* from Volume Two, with its basis in director Magdalena Osinska's background as a Polish immigrant, as the sort of story he was proud of telling with *Star Wars: Visions*. "There's so many more studios in the world that I want to work with. The Magda story is a great example of why it's best to let these creators tell their story and not be bound by the burdens of just telling a canon *Star Wars* story and making it fit into that big mythology."

"It became really clear that we didn't want to act as a Western studio that just sort of went there and said, 'We want your aesthetic, here's the story we want you to tell and here's the canon you need to follow.'"
EXEC PRODUCER JAMES WAUGH

It seems that, paradoxically, the best way to make the *Star Wars* universe feel expansive is by focusing in on the personal. ■

***Star Wars: Visions*, Vol. 3 premiered Oct. 29 on Disney+.**

Ready, Set, Animate!

Director Kenji Iwaisawa discusses the creative challenges of *100 Meters*, his exciting new anime about two rival sprinters.

By Charles Solomon

In 2019, Kenji Iwaisawa released his outrageous *On-Gaku: Our Sound*, a highly personal, low-budget feature about three unprepossessing high school students who form a band — even though they have no training, no talent and no knowledge of music. Adapted from Hiroyuki Ohashi's self-published manga, *On-Gaku: Our Sound* had a subversive punk energy that set it apart from more elaborate conventional features.

Iwaisawa's new film, *100 Meters (Hyakuemu),* is based on a manga by Uoto that follows two talented sprinters from elementary school through high school to the pro track circuit as adults. Togashi is so naturally gifted, he remains undefeated in the 100-meter dash, but he runs like a machine on autopilot. His victories bring him little pleasure. Komiya started running to escape his inability to relate to other people, but he's had no training — he runs in shoes that are falling apart out of loyalty to them. Togashi coaches Komiya; Komiya helps Togashi discover the excitement of running. A long-term friendship and rivalry develop, culminating in a final high-stakes race.

Dynamic Dash

100 Meters is a much more polished film than *On-Gaku: Our Sound*. Iwaisawa, who says he had "absolutely no running experience," skillfully blends rotoscoping with

Born to Run: Directed by Kenji Iwaisawa at Rock 'n' Roll Mountain studio, *100 Meters* follows a track star named Togashi and his friendship with Komiya, a transfer student who also becomes his rival.

drawn animation to capture the energy of the sport. He talked about *100 Meters* in a recent email interview with *Animation Magazine*.

"There were almost no film works in Japan themed around the 100-meter dash, a short-distance event," says Iwaisawa. "So the idea of taking on something no one had attempted before felt incredibly appealing. The original manga was quite substantial, so we had to discuss how to adapt it to fit the film's running time, which inevitably required restructuring the narrative. I initially proposed, 'I'd like to go with this structure, including some original film elements.' We then had several rounds of feedback from Mr. Uoto."

The look and tone of *100 Meters* is very different from *On-Gaku: Our Sound*. "*100 Meters* is a sports story, featuring Togashi, a genius, and Komiya, who lacks talent but runs with a possessed, relentless drive," says the director. "It's also about two completely different types [of people] meeting and eventually forming a rivalry where their positions reverse. Naturally, this led to a slightly more stoic narrative than *On-Gaku*."

"There were almost no film works in Japan themed around the 100-meter dash, a short-distance event, so the idea of taking on something no one had attempted before felt incredibly appealing."
DIRECTOR KENJI IWAISAWA

Iwaisawa watched runners on YouTube and even tried frame-by-frame analysis of the motions, but because he's not an animator himself, he says he left the movement and running sequences to Keisuke Kojima, who handled the character design and animation direction. "While I personally didn't research it that deeply, the team naturally did extensive research and translated the movements into animation," he adds. "I used rotoscoping because I can only create using that method."

The director mentions that expressing the sense of speed was difficult. "In regular animation, running is depicted using three-frame or two-frame poses, but running at incredible speeds like an athlete does is quite rare in standard animation," he explains. "I realized a full-out sprint moves in single frames, not three frames or two frames. When you see actual athletes running, they're so fast it gives you the illusion they might be fast-forwarded. That's how different an athlete's run is from an ordinary person's run."

One of the film's challenges was staying consistent as it takes the two main characters from boyhood to adulthood. "The elementary school part and the high school part were made by different teams," he explains. "The elementary school part was made using a method closer to standard animation techniques, while the high school part used rotoscoping. We had the difficulty of different teams using different methods. The characters sometimes moved in ways we hadn't intended, or elements added with good intentions ended up completely opposite to our vision. Adjusting for that was a real challenge."

Another challenge was how to show two stoic characters like Togashi and Komiya communicate their feelings visually. "Togashi had expressive facial expressions, so conveying his emotions wasn't too difficult," recalls Iwaisawa. "But with Komiya, it's more about suppressing his feelings — there are times when you genuinely can't tell what he's thinking. Animation often uses facial expressions to convey emotions, but Komiya is a character who struggles with that, so that part was challenging."

The film also uses training montages as a way of communicating a lot of information without any dialog. "As the director, it was difficult to pace them so they don't become too choppy," he points out. "We shot the live-action footage first and edited it and established the pacing. With regular animation, I think you'd adjust the pacing during the storyboard stage or once the drawings are in, but with rotoscoping, you can establish a certain rhythm with the live-action footage first, so it wasn't that difficult."

100 Meters' final race takes place during a rain, which reduces the colors to black, gray and white. "When I started this project, the first thing I did was go to a track meet," says Iwaisawa. "I witnessed a sequence you can only see at the venue: The athletes entering before the race, setting their starting blocks and warming up. Seeing that routine made me think, 'I want to include this scene in the movie.' I thought that if we could show it in one continuous take, following the athletes the whole time, it would make for a truly cinematic highlight. I wanted to express that part with a lavish, bold approach. The rain depiction wasn't particularly difficult, as the original manga features a rain-soaked final race. To convey that, we used techniques like muting the colors: I believe it became one of the most memorable scenes in the film." ■

GKIDS released *100 Meters* in select theaters in the U.S.

YOU'RE FIRED! ...NOW WHAT?

Disney Feature Animation veteran Dominick Domingo offers a few tips on how to get your career back off the ground after a sudden job loss.

By Dominick Domingo

When I began my stint at Disney Feature Animation in 1992 — working on a tiny film that became known as *The Lion King* — I was furnished with a three-year contract with yearlong options. My second contract spanned four years. And on it went throughout the '90s. My more seasoned colleagues assured me this kind of security was previously unheard of and that animation was notoriously unstable. Long-term contracts like mine would become a thing of the past (along with the bonus program) once the animation renaissance had run its course.

It's been said that *what goes up must come down*; the model was just not sustainable, it was believed. But oh, how the animation industry would continue to thrive! Between 1992 and 2025, the number of feature animation divisions at major studios has more than tripled, and the number of television animation studios in the U.S. has jumped from seven to more than 20. In the same time span, the estimated number of features produced annually around the globe has increased from 30 to over 600. Following suit, the estimated number of animated TV series in circulation worldwide has increased from 400 to over 4,000. Which means that animation jobs expanded from 50,000 to 70,000 in 1992 to approximately 1.2 million in 2025. In short, *the animation industry ain't going anywhere*.

Courtesy of The Jetsons/ Warner Bros.

Flexibility and Resilience

With enterprising art schools now cranking out viable candidates for these positions, the competition can be fierce. And with a seemingly endless supply of talent, studios can go through production artists like paper towels rather than foster ongoing relationships. Most contracts are per project these days or altogether non-existent — they're at will. In the current climate, the onus is on the artists themselves to keep work steady, create buoyancy and bounce back if a show is canceled. We've all seen the LinkedIn profiles bearing the telltale "Open for Work" frame that signals — with varying degrees of desperation — that a colleague is throwing their hat into the proverbial ring.

What steps should an artist take if they suddenly find themself in the vast talent pool, competing for limited jobs? We reached out to a few recruiters to get their best advice. Vanessa McAteer, head of recruiting at DreamWorks Animation offers the following tips:

"The flow of work in the animation industry today varies a great deal, not only in between projects but also between animation studios. One of the best ways artists can manage their careers and navigate the often uneven and fluctuating flow is to be proactive in sourcing assignments. Try to be crafty and creative with the type of work you take on and understand the timing of the work," says McAteer.

"Consider short-term or freelance gigs to fill gaps," she adds. "If you've been in leadership, be open to artist

work. It's helpful to be versatile for what's needed on each project and [to] adapt accordingly, rather than defaulting to what you've done most recently or being super specific to the level/role you wish to take on. There may not always be ongoing roles at major studios, so being strategic in utilizing your networks of recruiters, studio animation production staff or artist managers can help you cast the widest net and uncover opportunities."

Reentering the talent pool after a period of security can make you feel vulnerable. You may be reminded just how competitive the field is. This is an opportunity to put your best foot forward by upping your game. This can mean adding a new skill or program, reconfiguring your portfolio or filling gaps by creating new work. As Jana Day, a former Sony Pictures Animation recruiter and a career coach, advises:

"The entertainment industry is tough right now, and it can take longer than expected to land your next role. With my clients, the first step is always to pause and regroup — to process what just happened and get clear on what they really want next. From there, we look at practical steps: reconnecting with their network, building the skills they've been putting off and staying active in their creative community. Out of work doesn't mean out of the game — it means you're preparing for your next opening."

While submitting applications and awaiting responses, it's important to not only keep one's hopes up but to maintain structure. Any mandatory unemployment benefits workshop will share conventional wisdom like:

Continue to brush your teeth every day.

Get dressed in the morning, even if unemployed or freelancing from home.

"Consider short-term or freelance gigs to fill gaps. If you've been in leadership, be open to artist work. It's helpful to be versatile for what's needed on each project and adapt accordingly, rather than defaulting to what you've done most recently or being super specific to the level/role you wish to take on."

VANESSA MCATEER, HEAD OF RECRUITING AT DREAMWORKS ANIMATION

Treat the job search like a full-time job.

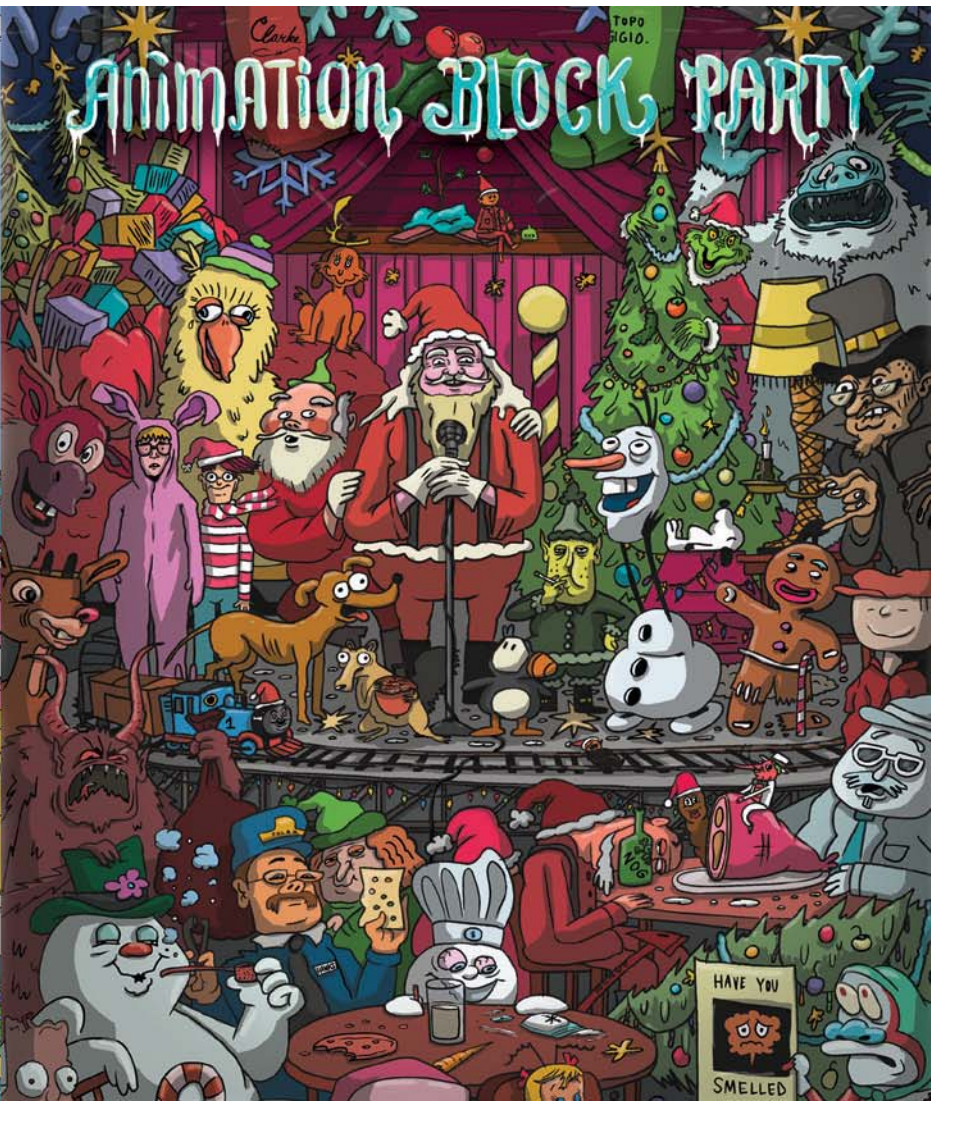
Creatives of all backgrounds have likely heard another piece of conventional wisdom: *keep creating*. While "waiting to be loved," as many say, you should keep practicing your craft. Create vehicles for yourself that showcase your talent and allow you to grow your voice. Those who respond well to deadlines may choose to take a class that provides the structure in which to create new portfolio work.

The Artist's Way

I can say from experience that beyond getting rusty, one's voice will stagnate without constantly abiding inspiration. The bottom line is one must reframe what can seem like a dismal impasse. I've been regularly approached by former Art Center students who did not immediately land their dream jobs in animation, framing it as a failure. More than once, I've heard myself advise: treat this as a gift. You get to continue growing and building your portfolio. You get to continue examining what makes you tick as an artist — what informs your sense of aesthetics, the materials and techniques that inspire you and even what drives you to tell stories in the first place! It's an opportunity in disguise.

This may sound easier said than done when there are mouths to feed or a mortgage to pay — but it's essential wisdom for creatives. Not to mention life itself is largely about reframing narratives — turning crises into opportunities! Those overcomers who lost everything then rebuilt can attest that there's no value in beating the drum of grievance; far more currency is yielded by moving toward a *solution*. So stay mobile. Keep your spirits up. And keep visualizing that dream job; with enough imagination, it's bound to materialize! ■

Dominick Domingo is a Disney Feature Animation veteran who painted backgrounds and produced visual development artwork on films like *The Lion King, Pocahontas, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Tarzan, The Little Match Girl* and *One by One*. Since then, he has worked for all the major studios in both feature animation and TV animation, and on both traditional and CG projects.



FEARS OF THE CLOWN

VFX supervisor Daryl Sawchuk guides us through the visual horrors of HBO's prequel series *It: Welcome to Derry*.

By Trevor Hogg

HBO's new series *It: Welcome to Derry* serves as a frightening prequel to the feature films *It* and *It: Chapter Two,* in which an evil entity terrorizes children every 27 years in the town of Derry, Maine. The new supernatural horror show consists of eight episodes based on Stephen King's 1986 bestseller and was developed by Andy Muschietti and Barbara Muschietti, who also were behind the films, as well as co-showrunners Jason Fuchs and Brad Caleb Kane.

Since the story is set in the 1960s, digital augmentation was required to achieve the desired scope, period authenticity and horrifying effects. With Andy Muschietti directing four episodes and involved with postproduction, a prevailing feature film mentality ruled the day.

"Originally, the show was thought [of] as a movie, but when they started to dive into the world of Derry and the backstories of the movies, it was felt that there was enough story to fill eight or nine hours of content," says Daryl Sawchuk, the show's visual effects supervisor. "This is set in 1962, and throughout the Cold War there is a lot of nuclear panic going on. There is a militaristic baseline for some of the story ideas. We have a couple of moments that flashback even further to help establish some of the storylines and [original] components to the world of *It*."

Re-creating Maine

Just under 2,700 visual effects shots had to be created, with Rodeo FX, Alchemy 24, Folks VFX, DNEG, Crafty Apes and Digital Domain serving as the primary vendors. "Oftentimes we used our in-house team to temp some shots as rough assemblies and edits were presented to the studio for the first time and to make sure that some of the creative holes were being filled for Andy," explains Sawchuk. "The in-house team also played a huge part in terms of fixing things, like things left in shot that shouldn't have been, which you realized after watching it for the 200th time. You definitely try to spread around the work and do as much as you can with the in-house team, which saves you the bigger dollars to spend on the bigger environments and characters."

A wide range of characters, creatures and environments needed to be produced for the series. "It wasn't like we did one thing," observes Sawchuk. "We were often shooting two units at the same time in two different locations. I had a strong on-set visual effects team led by Steven Tether, and I could lean on him to make sure that we got the photographic elements and all of the references, like the ball and lighting charts that were needed in order to pull things off once we got into post. The whole premise is that Pennywise [the clown] plays on people's fears, so there are moments in some of the characters' backstories that show up in various iterations, whether [in] creature or effects form. We've got a wide range of growing and transforming CG characters."

Motion performers worked through the scenes exploring the movements and mechanics of the CG creatures and characters. "That could be used as lighting reference for what skin might look like in a certain outdoor environment," explains Sawchuk. "Was it more freeing [creating characters and creatures manifested through fear]? Probably not, because we're still tied to the boundaries of real-world physics, gravity and lighting. Wherever possible, we tried to

"Was it more freeing [creating characters and creatures manifested through fear]? Probably not, because we're still tied to the boundaries of real-world physics, gravity and lighting. Wherever possible, we tried to give the visual effects team as much as [a] base in reality to start with that we could then match into and explore differences of performances."
VFX SUPERVISOR DARYL SAWCHUK

Vintage Horror-Scapes: The eight-part *It: Welcome to Derry* offered the visual effects team plenty of challenges, including imagining a small Maine town's '60s-era setting, a great deal of bloody effects and digital sets that re-created New England fall and winter seasons.

give the visual effects team as much as [a] base in reality to start with that we could then match into and explore differences of performances."

Derry, Maine was created with an even mix of locations and sets. "There is a lot of action and dialog taking place up on the iconic Standpipe from the films," remarks Sawchuk. "We shot a bunch of stuff onstage looking out at a blue world. Then using Port Hope [Canada] as our primary basis for the town of Derry, we had a bunch of drone photography, aerial arrays and bubbles. Crafty Apes created a CG version of Derry and populated all of our bluescreen work and several CG establishing shots as well."

One of the film's key locations is the Neibolt house, which is where Pennywise lives. "You'll understand more the importance of that home and why it plays a big part in the storylines of the films," says Sawchuk. "We managed to go back to the exact location where the films shot background plates. We had a front facade of a doorway and everything else was built out digitally."

Seasonal continuity had to be taken into account while constructing the shots. "Because the duration of the shoot happened over such a long period with the [writers' and actors'] strikes, we shot both summer and winter," says the VFX supervisor. "There were a lot of shots where the main street was shot practically, and we had a little bit of CG signage and top-ups to do, but we had to replace all of the trees because it was captured in winter and had to relight the scene. Or we shot in the summer, and the town of Port Hope decided to chew up the main street, so we had to replace it. There was quite a bit of work that we had to do digitally."

Obviously, the film wasn't lacking in body horror, blood and gore. As Sawchuk recalls, "The joke in post was 'More is more.'" He adds, "Andy is definitely a big proponent of going heavy-handed with a lot of that stuff. Darcy Callaghan and his special effects team did a great job with practical gore and blood effects. Our makeup prosthetics team led by Sean Sansom also did amazing work. We were digitally enhancing on top of that. Once the assemblies start to come together, you see where the moments are that Andy has teased out and where he wants the impact to go over the top with things. You'll definitely see where we've added stuff. There are a lot of moments where you get your fair share!"

Fires, Glass Jars and Snowy Scenes

The show's supernatural elements had to be grounded for the sake of believability. "I probably beat the drum the loudest for, 'Let's shoot as much as we can practically,'" says Sawchuk. "Even if it was a reference pass. We had a huge special effects component, like dropping real glass jars. The photographic elements were used as a starting point, and then we augmented them. The fire scene, which is a big moment in the story, we did a lot of testing. Daniel Vilar [DP collaborating with Muschietti] and I spent a lot of time doing tests with lighting tubes, LEDs and real fire to try to assemble a strong visual language."

The team spent two days working on car process shots on an LED volume stage. "We shot some stuff in a nighttime snowy environment with a kid who is hitchhiking," says Sawchuk. "It was a combination of a 360-degrees camera array to capture 360-degrees plates and multiple passes down several roads across Southern Ontario. We stitched those together and managed to compose a sequence of looping driving scenes that we could use as volume material to shoot the action and choreography that we needed to do on the stage."

The overall goal was to have the series feel like an extension of what was accomplished in the two *It* movies. "Bill Skarsgård came back for Pennywise, and he was fantastic," says Sawchuk. "We definitely honored and elevated the work that was done in the films, and everybody will see the series as an expansion upon some of that high-water work. From a series standpoint, this feels like an epic story. There are so many large environments and sequences that people will be excited by what was made possible by the team." ■

***It: Welcome to Derry* premiered Oct. 26 on HBO.**

Tech Reviews

By Todd Sheridan Perry

Blender 4.5

Blender's recent release of version 4.5 LTS marks another step forward for the open-source powerhouse, and this one feels particularly polished. Following the "Winter of Quality" initiative that shaped 4.4, this long-term support build focuses on refinement rather than reinvention — fine-tuning everything from animation and rigging tools to rendering performance and compatibility. It's not a flashy release, but it's the kind that makes a working artist's day smoother.

The primary improvement lies in animation and rigging. The development team continues to chip away at long-requested workflow enhancements, starting with per-bone viewport display overrides. Artists can now control visibility and drawing modes for individual bones, giving riggers more flexibility in how they organize and present complex armatures. The Driver Editor also sees meaningful improvements, with independent snapping and navigation updates that make animation-driven setups faster and more predictable. Meanwhile, new Shape Key operators — "Duplicate Shape Key" and "Update From Objects" — simplify morph target management, particularly for facial animation work where iteration is constant. These may sound like small features, but they add up to a more fluid character pipeline.

On the rendering side, Cycles continues to benefit from quiet but powerful upgrades. The addition of a "Filter Width" input on the Bump node and improved bump correction offer finer shading control — subtle changes that directly affect realism and lighting accuracy. Adaptive Subdivision also runs more efficiently, especially when working with displacement-heavy assets. Under the hood, the OptiX backend now requires NVIDIA drivers from version 535 or newer, ensuring support for modern GPUs. It's a sensible move that aligns Blender with contemporary hardware trends.

The user interface and pipeline stability have also matured. Performance in complex scenes feels snappier, and Blender's commitment to modern APIs continues with the full rollout of its Vulkan backend, matching OpenGL in stability while opening the door to next-generation GPU acceleration. Add-on developers have been nudged toward newer shader variants to ensure compatibility, and deprecated technologies — such as Collada export and big-endian blend file support — are being phased out to keep the foundation clean going into Blender 5.0.

Beyond the feature list, what stands out about the new release is its reliability. The LTS designation means two years of maintenance, and that's a big deal for studios that depend on consistency. Hundreds of fixes and subtle refinements that were carried over from the 4.4 development cycle contribute to an overall sense of cohesion. The software simply feels solid — whether you're scrubbing dense animation curves, sculpting heavy meshes or flipping between compositing nodes in Eevee.

Blender 4.5 doesn't try to reinvent the pipeline, and that's exactly what makes it valuable. It's a version that rewards familiarity — a mature, stable environment tuned for production. The UI remains intuitive, performance is up, and the incremental quality-of-life updates keep Blender competitive with the best commercial DCCs — even if larger studios are hesitant to adopt.

For artists and studios invested in open-source tools, this release underscores Blender's ongoing evolution from an indie alternative into a full-fledged production platform. It's not a showstopper update, but it's the kind of version you can rely on for the long haul — precisely what an LTS should be. ■

Website: blender.org

Todd Sheridan Perry is an award-winning VFX supervisor and digital artist whose recent credits include *I'm a Virgo*, *For All Mankind* and *Black Panther*. He can be reached at todd@teaspoonvfx.com.

Software reviews were written after being tested on a Puget Workstation AMD Ryzen Threadripper PRO 7975WX 4.0GHz 32 Core 350W: 128GB DDR5-5600 RAM and NIVIDIA RTX 6000 Ada Ge 48GB PCI-E. (pugetsystems.com)

THE GOTHAM GROUP

Boris FX Continuum

Boris FX has been a powerhouse in the world of postproduction and VFX for decades, and with Continuum 2025, the company continues refining one of the most comprehensive collections of effects, filters and motion-graphics tools on the market. This latest update focuses on AI-assisted creativity, enhanced usability and tighter host integration — all while preserving the deep control that longtime users expect.

The most significant additions this year are the new AI-driven effects. There are four major standouts: BCC+ AI Roto Brush, BCC+ AI Color Match, BCC+ AI Sky Replace and BCC+ AI Object Clean. Each one tackles a traditionally time-consuming task through machine learning. The AI Roto Brush is arguably the star update: It isolates subjects quickly without the need for tedious hand-drawn masks, and its frame-to-frame consistency is impressive. While it won't replace a skilled roto artist for highly detailed shots like hair, fine-edge motion blur or lack of FG/BG separation, it handles most cases effortlessly. The AI Color Match tool is another strong addition, analyzing footage to automatically balance color and exposure between shots from different cameras, which is particularly handy in multicam environments.

Even with these new AI tools, Continuum retains its familiar, artist-friendly workflow. The suite remains tightly integrated with After Effects, Premiere Pro, Avid, DaVinci Resolve and Nuke, with a consistent feel across platforms. GPU acceleration has been improved, providing faster playback and rendering — particularly in After Effects and Resolve — while the FX Editor has been refined for smoother interactivity. Parameters can now be animated directly within the editor, and the new parameter search function makes navigating complex effects setups significantly faster.

Longtime users will appreciate the continued care given to classic effects. Filters like BCC+ Glow, Film Glow and Chromatic Aberration have been optimized for modern linear workflows, and the ever-reliable Mocha integration has received better planar tracking and faster spline rendering. The Title Studio module, often used for 3D text and broadcast graphics, now loads faster and feels lighter overall, with more responsive camera control and cleaner extrusion rendering.

There are tangible performance improvements as well. On an RTX 4070 test system, playback remained smooth even when stacking multiple AI effects, a testament to Boris FX's GPU optimization. The suite also supports OpenColorIO and ACES, ensuring it plays nicely in professional color-managed pipelines. Crashes were rare in testing, and the overall experience feels robust and production-ready.

Boris FX Continuum 2025.5 may not reinvent the wheel, but it refines nearly every part of it. The AI tools feel purposeful rather than gimmicky, shaving hours off repetitive tasks, while still giving artists the control they need. The polish across legacy effects and the ongoing performance gains show a developer that understands both artistry and efficiency.

For compositors, motion designers and editors who live inside host applications every day, this update is a meaningful and worthwhile upgrade. It's smarter, faster and more versatile, striking that rare balance between automation and hands-on creative control. ■

Website: borisfx.com/products/continuum
Price: $325

JangaFX's IlluGen

JangaFX, the team behind EmberGen and LiquiGen, has unveiled its latest tool, IlluGen, and it's aimed squarely at real-time vfx artists who live and breathe procedural workflows. While EmberGen handles volumetric simulations and LiquiGen deals with fluid (liquid) simulations, IlluGen steps in as a node-based procedural asset generator, designed to create everything from animated textures and flipbooks to mesh-based effects — all within a single environment.

The goal here is consolidation. Traditionally, an artist might use Substance Designer for texturing, Houdini for procedural geometry, After Effects for compositing, and then jump into Unreal to test results. IlluGen bridges that fragmentation, giving you a unified 2D and 3D workflow purpose-built for real-time VFX pipelines. It is node-based like a shader editor, but instead of building materials, you are building assets — textures, meshes, flowmaps and animation sequences.

The interface is classic JangaFX: clean, performant and responsive. A timeline and curve editor sit alongside the node graph, allowing for animated parameters and looping sequences. It feels like a blend between Substance Designer and EmberGen — procedural yet immediately interactive. The viewport updates in real time, so you can see textures and meshes animate together before export.

The node library covers the essentials and then some. You've got procedural noise, warp, flowmap and shape nodes, as well as mesh construction and pivot-bake tools. Everything is nondestructive, and outputs are lightweight — optimized for game engines like Unreal and Unity. You can export flipbooks, mesh flipbooks, flowmaps and channel-packed textures directly. For VFX artists working on stylized energy beams, magical bursts or looping shockwaves, this is a dream. It allows quick iteration without touching an external sim or comp package.

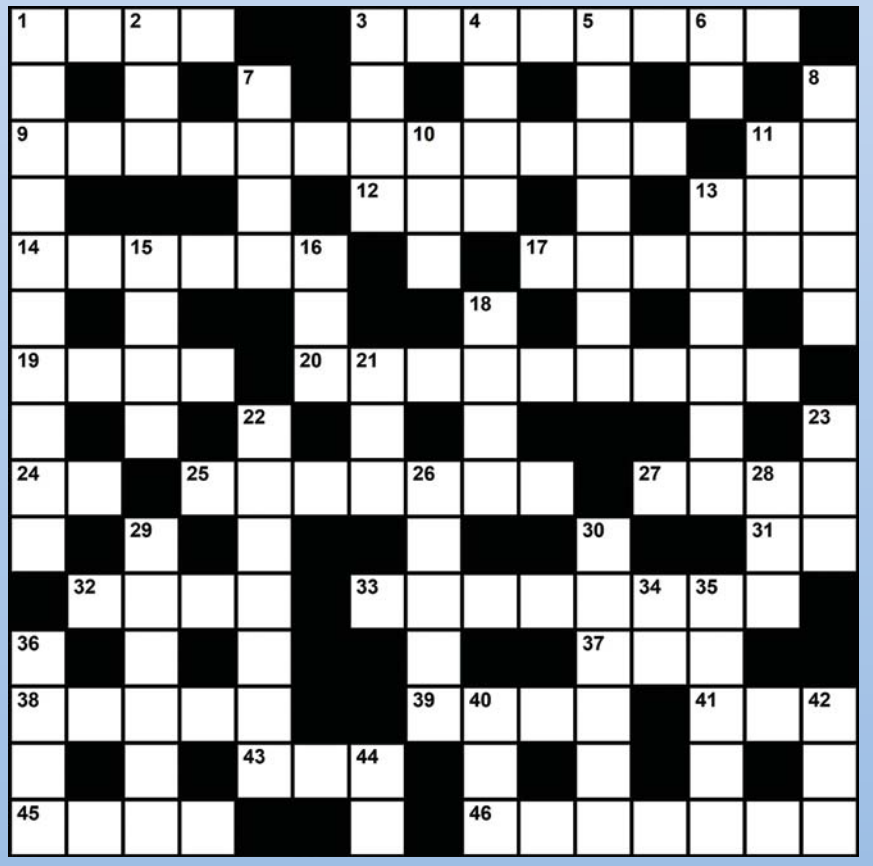
IlluGen's real strength lies in its ability to unify 2D and 3D asset generation. You can build a shockwave texture and the expanding mesh it rides on in the same graph, sync their timing and export them together. That's not something most texture tools can do. The procedural nature means you can dial in complexity without killing performance — something JangaFX clearly learned from its real-time simulation heritage.

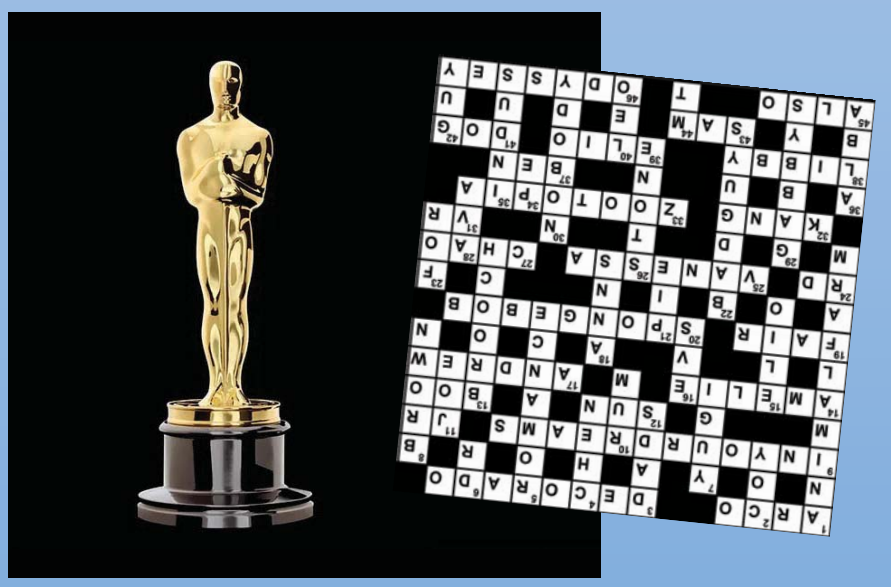
It should be noted that this tool is not trying to replace Houdini or Substance. Instead, it fills a niche between them. Houdini is still the heavyweight for large-scale simulation and pipeline integration, while Substance remains king of material authoring. IlluGen sits in the fast lane between them —a real-time VFX lab that gives you immediate, usable results. ■

Website: jangafx.com
Price: $299 (first year); $159 (annual maintenance)

Award Season Crossword Puzzle

By Myles Mellor





ACROSS

1 Animated science fiction fantasy film produced by Natalie Portman, 3 words
3 Animated Spanish film directed by Alberto Vázquez
9 American animated musical adventure fantasy comedy film starring Simu Liu and Craig Robinson and directed by Alex Woo , 3 words
11 Son of Snr
12 Source of solar power
13 Ghost's signature sound
14 Little ___ or the Character of Rain
17 Director of WALL-E and Finding Nemo, ____ Stanton
19 Annual event with rides and competitions
20 American animated adventure comedy film series directed by Derek Drymon
24 Road, for short
25 Character in the long-form animated series. Win or Lose, _____ Rodriguez
27 Japanese animated film starring Anna Yamada who plays the title character
31 Technology creating immersive digital experiences, abbr.
32 One of the directors of KPop Demon Hunters, Maggie _____
33 American animated buddy cop comedy film produced by Disney, a sequel to the 2016 film. _____ 2
37 He voiced the titular character in the DreamWorks animated film Joseph: King of Dreams, ____ Affleck
38 Character in Disney-Pixar's The Good Dinosaur
39 American animated adventure comedy film featuring the voices of Yonas Kibreab and Zoe Saldana
41 ___ Man, American animated superhero comedy film produced by DreamWorks
43 British animated series Fireman ____
45 Additionally
46 Dandelion's _____: experimental, dialog-free feature film from director Momoko Seto

DOWN

1 2025 animated adventure comedy film: the third adaptation of a George Orwell novella, 2 words
2 Playfully shy
3 June celebrants
4 The villain in Ne Zha 2, Master _____
5 The Princess and the Frog, for example
6 Fleming's ___ No
7 Teenager who solved the ancient Egyptian Millennium Puzzle, ___ Muto
8 Cartoon character, Charlie
10 Pirates of the Caribbean drink
11 Italian American actor, Pesci
13 Decorative pin
15 Animated science fiction adventure film starring Yona Kibreab and Zoe Saldana
16 Battery-powered vehicles, abbr,
18 Hathaway and Margret, for example
21 Quiche, e.g.
22 American animated heist action comedy film, The _____ _____ 2 produced by DreamWorks, 2 words
23 Pro
26 Basic Instinct star, last name
28 American-Japanese animated film released by Mamoru Hosoda and Studio Chizu
29 ___ Dollhouse, American animated musical fantasy comedy film produced by DreamWorks
30 Big hit for Shanghai Animation Studios in China
34 Exercise training, for short
35 Major river flowing through Pakistan
36 She lent her voice to the animated comedy-science fiction film Escape From Planet Earth, Jessica _____
40 ___ Tolstoy
42 Chap
44 Everest, for example, abbr.

Myles Mellor is one of the top crossword writers in the world who is published in over 1,000 magazines, newspapers and web outlets. For more info, visit ilovecrosswords.com and themecrosswords.com.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

The holidays are approaching and what better way to celebrate than watching a brand new ***Fraggle Rock: Back to the Rock*** special "The First Snow on Fraggle Rock" on Apple TV+, on Dec. 5. This month, the show's brilliant exec producer and actor, writer and puppet captain **John Tartaglia** (who stars as Gobo, Architect, Gunge, Barry Blueberry and Sprocket the Dog) shows us what a typical day is like in his amazing and super-busy life:

1

I start the day at home answering some emails with my personal assistant **Dolly**!

2

One of my first meetings of the day is hopping on a zoom with Jim Henson's Creature Shop's New York team, deciding on some designs for *Fraggle Rock*'s zen master **Mokey**. I love coming up with new looks for the Fraggles that still feel true to the magic and silliness they've had for the past 40 years! You might also notice a photo with my number one inspiration, Celine Dion, towards

3

Next stop: Jim Henson's Creature Shop in L.A.! Here I'm talking with creative director **Pete Brooke** about new puppet face molds for Ronald, the ever-curious pig in *Wowsabout*, a new project in development. You can also see the molds for his hedgehog pal Roxy on

4

Working on storyboarding for our new show *Monster Dance* with some Fraggle friends watching from nearby- ignore my messy desk!!!

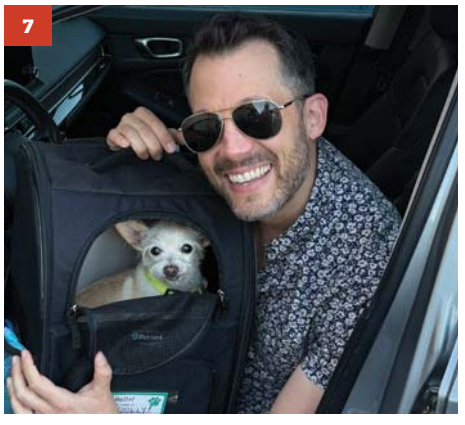
5

My next meeting of the day was yet another Zoom with the New York Creature Shop, but this time I'm joined by wonderful production manager **Amy Smith** as well as Red and Gobo Fraggle! I really love being the creative supervisor of this amazing legacy brand. From the upcoming Apple TV+ holiday special to the new collectibles, apparel and books we are constantly working on, it is a dream

6

Finishing up some work in the Creature Shop's conference room filled with Henson characters. This guy (the **Chamberlain Skeksis** from *The Dark Crystal*) always seems to be looking over my shoulder.

7

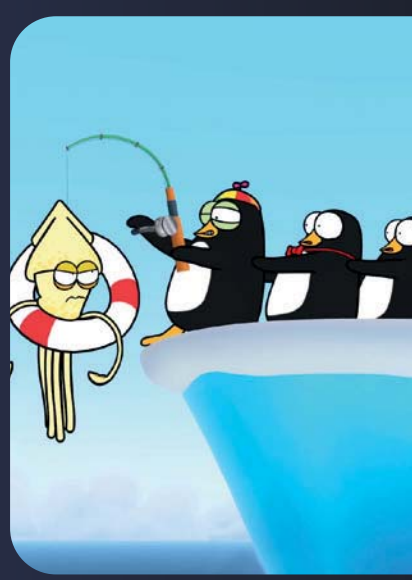


Heading back home with Dolly at the end of the day. As you can see, she loves the camera!

8

Final snap of the night night — reviewing a script before climbing into bed!

Scotland:
on the map and on the credits.



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"A VISUAL PLEASURE"

The New York Times

DREAMWORKS

DOG MAN

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

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A SHORT FILM BY CHRIS AND JUSTIN COPELAND

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Best Animated Film DETROIT BLACK FILM FESTIVAL 2025

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